The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of foster alumni in community and technical colleges, with a focus on Washington State, using a qualitative research approach. Foster alumni may be considered a sub-set of first generation students, yet they have needs that extend beyond those of other first-generation students (e.g., housing). Examination of this issue is timely. Funding designated for foster alumni in higher education has increased in recent years, leading to a variety of support structures and levels of service at the colleges. Yet in the current budget climate, with state support diminishing, the two-year colleges face increasing challenges in providing support not only for foster alumni but for all students. Foster alumni moving into adulthood and through the state colleges represent the quintessential case of in loco parentis, yet their emerging status as adults needs to be supported with appropriate services, not forced dependency.
This dissertation consists of three major manuscripts: a summary of the literature and two research reports, one focused on overall findings and the second focused on moving from the findings to considerations for practice. All three manuscripts utilized the critical social science or social justice perspective. The research manuscripts report the findings of a qualitative study using a collective case study design. Two colleges that serve foster alumni were identified and both staff and foster alumni students at the sites were interviewed, for a total of 10 students and 4 staff members. Participant selection utilized both purposive and convenience sampling methods. The study focused on three themes relevant to college participation which were identified based upon the review of the literature: Academic preparedness, psycho-social factors, and meeting basic needs. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; staff interviews served as both triangulation of the student data as well as a source of additional information on college services to foster alumni. Responses were analyzed for direct responses to interview questions as well as for emerging themes. In addition, case records (e.g., transcripts) were reviewed as an additional method of data triangulation.

Findings of the study were reported through individual case summaries in manuscript two as well as cross-case analysis in both manuscripts. While the participants in this study had high rates of high school completion and many had shown signs of “early promise” for academic achievement, all needed pre-college level course remediation in at least one area. A majority of participants indicated having felt depressed, yet only one participant had a diagnosis of depression; most seemed to consider some level of depression to be a natural outcome in their situation. Indications of resilience and internal locus of control were evident. Many continued to struggle to meet basic needs while in college, and eight of the ten student participants reported having experienced periods of homelessness since leaving foster care.

Based upon the findings of this study, foster alumni share certain characteristics with other first-generation students, yet their needs in particular areas necessitate additional on-campus services and/or stronger connections with community partners.
Considerations for enhancing support services in the community and technical colleges in seven different areas are given, including designating staff contacts, building community partnerships to support housing, arranging for priority registration and financial aid processing to avoid enrollment gaps, and providing optional (not mandatory) mentoring relationships.
Supporting Independence: A Collective Case Study
of Foster Alumni in Community and Technical Colleges

by
Catherine P. Forte

A DISSERTATION

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Education

Dean of the College of Education

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

______________________________
Catherine P. Forte, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for their support. My husband, David, not only provided continual encouragement and was an excellent sounding board for research concepts, but supported me by keeping our son, who was seven years old at the time I began the program, occupied for one day every weekend so that I could have a full day for studying. My son, Alex, was supportive in allowing me the time away from my role as “Mom,” both while I attended the courses required during the first two years of the program as well as while working on reports and projects. Alex, your energy and sense of humor always cheered me up when I needed a break. Thank you both for your understanding and love. I would also like to thank my mother, Patricia Sabin, for nurturing my love of learning from an early age and for being my first teacher; and my father, the late Ken Sabin, for providing an example of excellence in all that he did. And thank you to my four younger sibling, Andrea, Karen, Paul, and Roxanne, for enduring my first attempts at teaching by attending my “summer school” in a makeshift classroom in the barn shed.

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Dissertation Overview

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate scholarly competence and to make an original contribution to the field, utilizing the manuscript document dissertation format as outlined by the Oregon State University Graduate School. The present section, Chapter 1, summarizes the common themes in the two manuscripts. Chapter 2 consists of a literature review, Foster Alumni and College Readiness: A Review of the Literature. Chapter 3 is a report of research findings, Supporting Independence: A Collective Case Study of Foster Alumni in Community and Technical Colleges. This title is intended to convey the paradoxical task of providing essential support services while encouraging the independence that is necessary for a healthy transition to adulthood. Chapter 4 is a manuscript which focuses the research findings on considerations for college services, titled Supporting Independence: Foster Alumni Services in the Community and Technical Colleges. Chapter 5 provides a conclusion and overview of the themes examined, with further discussion of additional research and implications for practice as suggested by this study.

The common theme of the manuscripts is the experiences of foster alumni in the community and technical colleges, with a focus on Washington State. The literature review manuscript provides an overview of prior research and the existing state of knowledge on foster alumni in the colleges and factors related to their college readiness: (a) academic levels, (b) psycho-social issues, and (c) meeting basic needs. The research manuscripts present the findings of a qualitative study—using a collective case study design—and address these three areas of college readiness, describe emerging themes, and relate the findings to considerations for services. The manuscripts utilize a critical social science or social justice perspective.
Rationale

The situation of foster alumni in the two year colleges represents the quintessential example of *in loco parentis*. Foster alumni, defined as young people who have “aged out” of the foster care system without being adopted nor returning to their families of origin, have had the state as a legal parent for the period leading to their transition to adulthood; therefore, who more than the state should continue to be interested in their well being? And in the case of community and technical colleges, the staff that serve these particular young people—along with the many other students who enter our doors—are in the best position to support a successful transition to adulthood. Yet the understanding of what is needed in order to best support foster alumni is hindered by a general lack of information (studies of foster alumni to date have focused on four-year colleges), leaving a gap that may be filled by well-intentioned yet ineffective approaches.

From an institutional perspective, funds have been designated in recent years to serve foster alumni in higher education (e.g., Passport to College), yet state funding to the colleges is diminishing as a whole at the time of this writing. Therefore, more focused, cost-effective services are essential. One avenue to establishing support, used by a number of colleges, is linking foster alumni services to other first-generation systems of support such as the long-standing TRIO programs.

Well-meaning though this approach may be, it often does not go far enough. For instance, without the support of extended family, gaps in enrollment and the loss of financial aid represent a threat of homelessness for foster alumni. While colleges cannot directly address all potential areas of need, some areas of support are consistent with student services functions and others can be met through enhanced community partnerships.

The goal of this study is to illustrate the experiences of foster alumni as they bridge the gap between dependency on state care to independent adulthood, with community and technical colleges acting as the setting and the means for that initial step. The desired outcomes of this examination are twofold: (a) to empower foster alumni and
related advocacy organizations by providing information beneficial to building a case for services, and (b) to provide college staff and leadership with information that may be translated into tools for focused, effective services for this particular group of students.

**Thematic Introduction**

Critical social science is a useful lens through which to view situations where fundamental inequalities in status or resources exist, as is the case with foster alumni. Views of society’s responsibility to children who have suffered parental abuse or neglect are closely bound to societal notions of childhood itself. In earlier times, children were expected to labor alongside their parents on family farms or, in some cases, serve as apprentices or servants to other families; formal education was often a luxury (Askeland, 2006). Our changing notions of childhood, and the role of children in society, impacts our views of appropriate treatment of children and youth today. The needs of former foster children intersect with those of society at large; it is in both parties’ interest to see these young people transition into healthy, productive adulthood.

The guiding question for this study is “What are the experiences of foster alumni in the community colleges?” Corwin (2008) conducted ground-breaking research into the experiences of foster alumni in four-year college settings; her study described ethnographic interviews of six foster alumni as they prepared for and enrolled in college. Policy and practical implications of the study included avenues of information-gathering, housing, delayed emancipation, financial aid, and comprehensive support services. Corwin’s findings helped define two areas of specific inquiry for this study:

1. **Basic Needs.** How are participants meeting their basic needs while in college, particularly in relation to housing?

2. **Psycho-Social.** What types of personal and practical support do the participants have? What intrapersonal factors play a role in their college success?

The first question above relates to practical concerns faced by all college students, whether at a four-year or community college. A potentially significant issue for foster alumni, however, is the lack of dormitories at most community colleges. As noted by
Corwin (2008), foster alumni who live in dormitories still face problems with housing during school breaks, but community college students are likely to have even greater challenges (and costs) without student housing as an option.

The second question above relates to Corwin’s (2008) recommendation for delayed emancipation for foster youth. Delayed emancipation, or extending foster care services beyond age 18, is being implemented for foster youth in several states, including Washington (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008; Washington State Legislature, 2008).

A third area of inquiry relates to college preparedness. Numerous studies have shown that foster youth are more likely than non-foster youth to have academic skill deficits and are less likely to have graduated from high school (e.g., Blome, 1997; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). Therefore, a third theme was included in the present study that relates most specifically to common notions of college readiness:

3. **Academics.** What educational barriers did participants have upon college entry (if any), and what impact did they have?

For many foster alumni, though certainly not all, a lack of academic preparedness makes acceptance at a four-year college more difficult. Yet if these students opt instead for a community or technical college, the lack of housing (as mentioned above) may be a barrier. Foster alumni, therefore, may find themselves in a “Catch 22” situation: Their academic backgrounds are more likely to indicate beginning at a community college, a setting that is more challenging based on its lack of student housing. Identification of systemic barriers, such as housing concerns, is central to a critical social science view of the issue.

In addition to the guiding question and the three specific areas of inquiry identified above, additional themes that emerged through interviews and observations have been included in the results section of the second manuscript. One example of an emerging theme is the notion of “early promise.” Many of the participants indicated that they had performed well academically in grade school, but by the time they entered
college—in spite of having graduated from high school at higher rates than anticipated based upon the literature—all were in need of remediation in at least one area. A possible solution suggested by this observation would be earlier identification of foster children of high potential and partnership building with the K-12 system to enhance college readiness.

To supplement the information contained in the three main manuscripts, which were subject to the page limitations of the journal targeted for publication, two substantial appendices have been provided. Appendix A addresses methods used in the study, while Appendix B provides further detail on the recommendations for research. The interview protocols and release of information forms for both student and staff participants are also included in the appendices section.

**Summary**

Using a critical social science approach, the manuscripts that follow present an overview of the literature and the results of a collective case study, both focused on the theme of foster alumni in the community and technical colleges. The manuscripts (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) follow the page length guidelines of a particular journal, in keeping with the goal of the manuscript format, which is to publish the dissertation findings in a peer-reviewed journal. The additional sections of this document are provided in accordance with the Graduate School guidelines at Oregon State University.
Glossary of Terms

**Foster care.** “Foster care is a living arrangement for children who a child protective services worker or a court has decided cannot live safely at home. Foster care arrangements include non-relative foster homes, relative foster homes (also known as ‘kinship care’), group homes, institutions, and pre-adoptive homes” (ChildTrends, 2003, ¶ 13). The goal of foster care was typically to reunite children with their families when possible; over the years, there has been increasing recognition that reunion is not always in the child’s best interest, in which case stability in placement and contact with siblings are important goals (Lau, Litrownik, Newton, & Landsverk, 2003; Martyna, 2007).

**Foster alumni.** The term “foster alumni” is used here to differentiate those who are 18 and over and have “aged out” of the foster care system (i.e., turned 18 without being returned to their families of origin or adopted) from “foster children,” meaning those under age 18. The term “aged out” is used in the literature to describe these youth; “emancipated” is also used (Shirk & Stangler, 2004, p. vii; Vacca, 2008, p. 485).

**First-generation student.** The authorizing legislation for TRIO programs, which serve first-generation college students, defined an eligible student as “an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (Higher Education Act of 1965/1998, p. 3). For purposes of this review, foster alumni—being former wards of the state—are considered a subcategory of first-generation college students. Additionally, foster alumni are more likely than average to report that their biological parents did not attend college (Burley & Halpern, 2001). One area in which foster alumni and other first-generation students overlap most directly is in the area of kinship care; about one-fourth of foster children are placed with relatives, often in low-income households with concomitant barriers to higher education (Wolanin, 2005). However, to differentiate the two groups, the term “first-generation college student” will be used in the present review to indicate non-foster alumni.

**Homeless.** The federal definition of “homeless individual” is one who “lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” or “who has a primary nighttime residence that is a...shelter...or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily
used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” (“Homeless Assistance,” 2010, §11301). In addressing the situation of foster alumni, the notion of “couch surfing” must also be considered, a term used to describe “relying upon peer networks as resources for survival” (Perez & Romo, 2011, p. 239). Couch surfing, defined here as depending upon temporary sleeping arrangements with friends or acquaintances, meets the federal definition of homelessness in terms of lacking a fixed and regular nighttime residence, but does not extend as far as living in a temporary shelter or on the street.
Chapter 2

Manuscript #1
Foster Alumni and College Readiness: A Review of the Literature

by

Catherine Forte
Oregon State University
Major Professor: Darlene Russ-Eft, Ph.D.
Chapter 2
Foster Alumni and College Readiness: A Review of the Literature

Foster alumni, defined as young people who “age out” of foster care (i.e., emancipate without being returned to their biological families, nor adopted), typically have particular disadvantages upon entering adulthood. One factor that may aid in the transition to adulthood, access to higher education, is being addressed through enhanced services and supportive legislation for these youth in many states. The purpose of this literature review is to examine factors that impact both foster alumni’s readiness for college and their ability to persist in college, providing an overview of research findings from a social justice perspective that will also enhance community college leaders’ ability to make evidence-based decisions.

Reducing societal stratification and furthering social justice has long been a part of the community college mission (Brubacher & Rudy, 1976). Bailey and Morest (2006) re-asserted the importance of this mission through essays examining various facets of the community college’s “equity agenda.” In another example of efforts to enhance social justice and access to higher education, federal TRIO programs were created in 1964 to support first-generation college students (Higher Education Act of 1965/1998); language has since been added to TRIO program mandates to include foster alumni (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Foster alumni may be considered a subset of first-generation students, due both to being legal wards of the state and to the likelihood that their biological parents were less likely to be college educated (Burley & Halpern, 2001). There is evidence that foster alumni have particular needs that differ from, and extend beyond, those of other first-generation students. They have experienced separation from their families during their formative years, and, in addition, have been required to establish independence earlier than most other young adults: “Many arrive at college in a survival mode” (Casey Family Programs, 2010b, p. 9).
**Problem Statement and Purpose**

This literature review presents evidence that foster alumni, who may be considered a sub-set of first generation college students, have needs that differ from, and extend beyond, those of other first-generation students, and that services therefore should be developed with an understanding of these differences. Three broad areas are examined: (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social factors, and (c) meeting basic needs, particularly housing, while a fourth section provides an overview of recent legislation and educational service enhancements targeted for foster alumni.

**Critical Social Science Perspective**

Critical social science is a useful lens through which to view situations where fundamental inequalities in power, including status and resources, exist (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011), as is the case with foster youth. The term “social justice” is also used to describe an approach to research that includes an emotional or political affiliation with participants as well as a goal of advocacy, not just collection of data (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 475). Bruskas (2008) opined that foster children are marginalized within society and powerless within the foster care system that makes decisions for them; foster alumni in turn would enter adulthood having experienced this marginalization and powerlessness during their developmental years. Therefore, working from a social justice perspective, my primary goal is to provide information that may be useful to individual foster alumni and to self-advocacy groups such as Passion to Action, a statewide foster alumni advisory group (Independence for Foster Youth, 2011), as they seek to enhance educational opportunities for young adults who were formerly in foster care. My secondary goal is to provide information to community college leaders that will help them recognize the needs of this distinct group and thereby inform practice in the planning of services for foster alumni, whether those services are provided directly by the community colleges or through the creation or enhancement of community partnerships.

**Foster Alumni and Higher Education**

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy reported that 550 foster youth transitioned out of care in 2008, the most recent year for which statistics were available.
This number is compatible with a national figure showing that approximately 20,000 to 24,000 foster youth emancipate from the system each year (Nancy, 2008; Vacca, 2008). However, the number of potential college students is much higher; if they attended college at the same rate as their peers, “nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education” (Wolanin, 2005, p. v).

Foster alumni are therefore underrepresented on college campuses. Estimated levels of enrollment in higher education ranged between 7% and 13% (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Of the foster youth who completed high school, 20% were enrolled in higher education (Wolanin, 2005), compared to 68% of high school graduates overall (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Foster alumni share certain characteristics with first-generation college students, including the likelihood of having biological parents who were not college educated (Burley & Halpern, 2001). While first-generation college students’ enrollment comes closer to the level of the general population, they, too, are underrepresented in higher education when compared to students whose parents have degrees. According to one study, 59% of first-generation students had enrolled in some form of higher education within two years of high school graduation, compared to 93% from families in which at least one parent had a bachelor’s degree, the demarcation point for non first-generation (Choy, 2001). In addition to fitting the category of first-generation student, foster alumni are also more likely to be low income and of color, two additional factors that correlate with lower college completion rates (Thayer, 2000).

As stated by David Ambroz, Executive Director of the Los Angeles City College Foundation for support of foster alumni, “Foster youth are our children. The state has pulled them legitimately from their homes, and invests in them for years, only to see that investment go nowhere after they emancipate” (Ambroz, 2011, ¶ 6). If foster alumni are “our children,” then state colleges seem to be a natural avenue to aid these young people in their transition to self-sufficient adulthood, with 55-75% of foster alumni choosing two-year colleges as their entry point to education (Herlocker, 2006; Washington Higher
Effective programs include an understanding of students’ backgrounds, including “cultural scaffolding” that is targeted toward bridging any gaps students may have between their prior experiences and the requirements of student life (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005, p. 4). Understanding the needs of foster alumni is particularly important for community and technical colleges, since they are a likely entry point to higher education for foster alumni.

Method

Utilizing the Academic Search Premier database through Ebscohost, I conducted searches using the following key words: “foster youth,” “foster child education,” “foster youth high school” and “foster alumni.” For information relating to the specific research areas, the terms “foster (and) community college,” “social capital,” “homeless (and) foster youth,” “foster youth (and) psychological,” “foster youth (and) substance abuse,” “foster youth (and) mental health” were used. Articles that were identified for full-text availability through 360 Link were often accompanied by a “related articles” section identifying additional studies. In addition to key word searches, reference listings from relevant research articles were used to identify additional studies on the topic. As available, books on foster children and alumni of care (e.g., On Their Own, Shirk & Stangler, 2004) were also identified. General web searches were also used to locate publically-available resources (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Department of Education).

Overview

Research into the experiences and needs of foster children as they “age out” of foster care (i.e., emancipate without being returned to their biological families or adopted) has increased in the last five years or so. Two major sources stand out. The Casey Family Foundation publishes guidebooks and compiles bibliographies relevant to the education of foster children and alumni, and researcher Mark Courtney, a professor at the University of Washington School of Social Work and Executive Director of Partners for Our Children, has authored and co-authored numerous articles on the needs of foster children as they transition to adulthood. A number of peer-reviewed research articles on
both foster children and foster alumni were identified in publications focused on child welfare, psychology, and education. Government-sponsored studies and policy briefs (e.g., Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008), most drawing from large databases, have also been included as available. Two recent doctoral dissertations on foster alumni in university settings (Corwin, 2008; Herlocker, 2005) were identified, as well as one master’s thesis (Xiong, 2007).

To set the stage for the literature review, a definition of key terms precedes the summary of the literature. The first three sections focus on (a) academic preparedness upon college entry; (b) psycho-social factors related to college attendance, including interpersonal support and intrapersonal factors which may affect college success, such as resilience; and (c) provisions for meeting basic needs while in college, particularly in relation to housing. These three sections summarize the current state of knowledge in regard to the research questions proposed here, encompassing both personal and practical concerns. The fourth and final section describes current college services for foster alumni, with an emphasis on community colleges in Washington State.

Definition of Terms

The following section outlines some of the key concepts and terms used in this review. Whenever possibly, definitions have been drawn from the literature.

Foster care. “Foster care is a living arrangement for children who a child protective services worker or a court has decided cannot live safely at home. Foster care arrangements include non-relative foster homes, relative foster homes (also known as ‘kinship care’), group homes, institutions, and pre-adoptive homes” (ChildTrends, 2003, ¶ 13). The goal of foster care was typically to reunite children with their families when possible; over the years, there has been increasing recognition that reunion is not always in the child’s best interest, in which case stability in placement and contact with siblings are important goals (Lau, Litrownik, Newton, & Landsverk, 2003; Martyna, 2007).

Foster alumni. The term “foster alumni” is used here to differentiate those who are 18 and over and have “aged out” of the foster care system (i.e., turned 18 without being returned to their families of origin or adopted) from “foster children,” meaning
those under age 18. The term “aged out” is used in the literature to describe these youth; “emancipated” is also used (Shirk & Stangler, 2004, p. vii; Vacca, 2008, p. 485).

First-generation student. The authorizing legislation for TRIO programs, which serve first-generation college students, defined an eligible student as “an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (Higher Education Act of 1965/1998, p. 3). For purposes of this review, foster alumni—being former wards of the state—are considered a subcategory of first-generation college students. Additionally, foster alumni are more likely than average to report that their biological parents did not attend college (Burley & Halpern, 2001). One area in which foster alumni and other first-generation students overlap most directly is in the area of kinship care; about one-fourth of foster children are placed with relatives, often in low-income households with concomitant barriers to higher education (Wolanin, 2005). However, to differentiate the two groups, the term “first-generation college student” will be used in the present review to indicate non-foster alumni.

Homeless. The federal definition of “homeless individual” is one who “lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” or “who has a primary nighttime residence that is a...shelter...or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” (“Homeless Assistance,” 2010, §11301). In addressing the situation of foster alumni, the notion of “couch surfing” must also be considered, a term used to describe “relying upon peer networks as resources for survival” (Perez & Romo, 2011, p. 239). Couch surfing, defined here as depending upon temporary sleeping arrangements with friends or acquaintances, meets the federal definition of homelessness in terms of lacking a fixed and regular nighttime residence, but does not extend as far as living in a temporary shelter or on the street.

Results

Research articles related to the three primary areas of (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social factors, and (c) meeting basic needs are summarized below. An additional section describing recent legislation and college services for foster alumni, with an emphasis on Washington State, concludes the review.
Academic Preparedness

As a group, foster children demonstrate lower academic achievement during their K-12 years. In fact, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2008) stated that “children in foster care represent one of the most academically at risk-populations in the education system” (p. 1). Even so, their college aspirations remain high (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Osterling & Hines, 2006). The following sections of the literature review summarize findings on foster children in relation to four specific areas related to academic preparedness for college: School mobility, academic levels, high school completion rates, and special education status.

School mobility. About two thirds of foster alumni had changed schools at least seven times during their K-12 years (Casey Family Programs, 2010a), while almost one-third of foster alumni reported 10 or more school changes (Pecora et al., 2006). School mobility has been associated with reduced academic performance, not the least of which is the problem obtaining complete school records for foster children (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

While school mobility does not appear to affect all children equally, negative impacts have generally been found (e.g., Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Scherr, 2007). Other researchers also point out the loss of social capital inherent in school moves (Pribesh & Downey, 1999). Reductions in social capital are potentially significant to foster children, whose lives may not be stable in other areas: “Changing schools is particularly disruptive to the education of foster youth because it reinforces a cycle of emotional trauma of abandonment and repeated separations from adults and friends” (Wolanin, 2005, p. vi). Changing schools mid-year can be particularly problematic (Malmgren & Gagnon, 2005). In Washington State, a lawsuit was filed in 1998 on behalf of foster children who had experienced multiple placements (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2011). The suit resulted in the formation of an oversight panel in 2004, and efforts since that time related to stabilizing placements are likely, in turn, to result in more stable school placements.
Academic levels. The academic achievement of foster children while in the K-12 system is directly relevant to readiness for college-level work. One strong indication of low academic achievement is being held back (retained at grade level) rather than continuing to the next grade. A number of studies found that foster children are more likely to be held back, with numbers ranging from 33% to 50%, the more conservative of which was still seven times greater than that of non-foster children (Scherr, 2007; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Another study compared specific types of neglect or abuse to specific impact on school performance, finding that neglect correlated with academic skill deficits and physical abuse correlated with school-related behavioral difficulties, while all types of abuse indicated greater risk of grade retention (Stone, 2007).

Performance on measures of academic achievement has also been studied in relation to foster children. One recent review of the literature found evidence that at least one-third of foster children were performing below grade level across a variety of academic areas (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008), while another study found that 23% of foster children had “severe” deficits in either math or reading, defined as scoring at or below the first percentile compared to age norms (Zima et al., 2000). Evaluation of foster children’s performance in both grade school and high school showed that foster care status alone predicted a 7-8 percentile point decrease in test scores (Burley & Halpern, 2001). An evaluation of foster children’s performance on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), which until recently was the major standardized test used in Washington State public schools, showed that they “met standards” at half the rate of non-foster children (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008).

Foster children, therefore, appear to demonstrate educational deficits in such related areas as on-time completion of grades, academic skill levels, and performance on standardized tests. Considering the likelihood of deficits as described above, it is perhaps not surprising that foster children graduate from high school at a rate that is lower than that of the general population, the topic of the next section.
**High school completion.** As documented in the section above, many foster children experience academic difficulties; lack of high school completion is another factor that negatively impacts college readiness. Wolanin (2005) used the term “college qualified” to describe foster alumni who have graduated from high school (p. xiii). Although two-year colleges offer options for high school completion, lack of a high school degree upon entry certainly delays attainment of more advanced credentials.

The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008) reported that less than 60% of youth in foster care have completed high school upon exiting care. High school completion rates for foster children across studies ranged from 50% (Wolanin, 2005) to 56% (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Pecora et al., 2006) to 64% (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). Completion rates rise when the General Educational Development (GED) exam is included as a measure of high school completion, yielding completion rates between 77% (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004) and 85% (Pecora et al., 2006). In comparison, high school completion rates in the general population have been reported at 75% for on time graduation, defined as within 4 years of starting 9th grade (Chapman, Laird, & Kewalramani, 2010), up to 80% by age 25 (Bauman & Graf, 2003), or as high as 92-93% when taking into account both high school and GED completion (Chapman, Laird, & Kewalramani, 2010; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

Although a myriad of factors is likely to impact high school completion, some foster children struggle throughout their K-12 experience with issues that are identifiable and can be diagnosed. A clear indication of a specific barrier to school performance is being found eligible for special education services, the topic of the following section.

**Special education status.** Special education status can be conferred based upon documented cognitive, behavioral, or emotional issues that are likely to impede learning (Calvin et al., 2000). This section of the literature review, therefore, relates both to academic preparedness and the section on social/interpersonal factors to follow.

Foster children are more likely than non-foster children to be placed in special education. Estimates range from 25% of high school aged students (Washington State
Institute for Public Policy, 2008) to as high as 33%-50%, as compared to 10% of the general population (Geenen & Powers, 2006; Zetlin, 2006). Two sources also indicated that foster children are more likely to be placed in special education due to emotional/behavioral disabilities, at a rate of 5 to 15 times greater than a comparison population (Goerge, Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008). As reported by Stone (2007), students with a history of physical abuse are at greater risk for behavioral problems in the school setting; an earlier study also showed that over half of students with a diagnosis related to emotional disturbance had experienced abuse (Mattison, Spitznagel, & Felix, 1998).

It has also been established that children in foster care suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome at a rate 10 to 15 times greater than the general population. Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is the leading environmental (non-genetic) cause of intellectual disability, with effects ranging from mild to severe depending upon exposure and biological resilience. Milder effects include learning disabilities and attention deficits; more significant disabilities include mental retardation (Astley, Stachowiak, Clarren, & Clausen, 2002). Since FAS is not treatable per se, interventions must focus on remediating the effects of the prenatal exposure. The effects of FAS may lead to qualification for special education services.

Special education status is a predictor for greater likelihood of dropping out of high school. Of students with documented disabilities, those with an emotional or behavioral disability were most likely to drop out of school (51%), followed by students with a learning disability (29%) (Lehr, 2004).

**Summary of academic preparedness.** Based upon the literature review, the academic preparedness of foster alumni may be summarized as follows: Foster children are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school. They are also designated as being in need of special education services at a higher than average rate, they are more likely than the general population to receive this designation due to emotional/behavioral disturbance, and these designations correlate with lower rates of high school completion. They are also at much greater risk for fetal alcohol syndrome, the effects of which
include mild to severe learning impairments. All of these factors stand to impact not only college entry but college success. For instance, lower levels of academic achievement are likely to impact college placement exam scores. In turn, placing into adult basic education level coursework upon college entry is associated with a reduced likelihood of degree completion (Prince, 2008).

Given the discouraging picture of foster children’s academic attainment described above, should we conclude that college is unlikely to be an option for them? While foster children as a whole struggle with educational issues at a higher rate than average, it can also be stated that the majority of foster alumni were not placed in special education and did graduate from high school. A study of foster alumni enrolled in a four-year college reported that external factors related to college success included stability in high school placement (which would be the opposite of the school mobility that many foster youth experience), along with a challenging curriculum (Merdinger, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005). The study also cited important personal characteristics associated with academic success, such as “being intelligent” and “being identified as gifted and talented in elementary school” (p. 874), characteristics that do apply to particular foster alumni. While the preceding section on academic skill levels focused on the effects of past circumstances, the sections to follow focus on current situations that have the potential to impact college success.

**Psycho-Social Factors**

Foster children are impacted not only by the circumstances that led to their placement in state care but the experience of being in foster care in itself (Wolanin, 2005). It is also difficult to separate the effects of any pre-existing characteristics from the impact of the foster care experience (Pecora et al., 2006). Given the potential influence of pre-existing factors, early trauma, and involvement in the foster care system, there is a body of research indicating that foster alumni as a whole experience mental health concerns at a higher rate than average (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2005; ChildTrends, 2003; Goerge et al., 1992; White et al., 2009). Both interpersonal factors such as social support and intrapersonal factors such as mental health have the potential
to influence academic success (Viadero, 2009). Minority status is also addressed in this section, as it is relevant not only to interpersonal relations but also to the social justice paradigm guiding this review. However, focusing only on the psychological problems experienced by foster alumni does them a disservice and is contrary to the guiding principles of this review. Therefore, this section also addresses the ways in which many foster alumni have transcended less than ideal circumstances, demonstrating a quality identified as “resilience” in the related literature (e.g., Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Hass & Graydon, 2009).

Psychological diagnoses and substance abuse. As outlined in the earlier section addressing special education status, foster children are more likely than the general population to suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) (Astley, Stachowiak, Clarren, & Claussen, 2002) and to receive special education services due to behavioral or emotional issues (e.g., Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008). According to a Casey Family study (2005), over half (54%) of foster alumni surveyed at age 20 to 33 were experiencing problems related to mental health, and 20% reported having experienced major depression in the last six months; these rates are approximately double that of the general population for any disorder and over three times as high for major depression (National Institute of Mental Health, 2010). Another study, using a diagnostic interview scale, found that about one-third (37%) of foster alumni met criteria for a psychiatric disorder (McMillen et al., 2005), a rate which is still above average. The Casey Family study (2005) also found that alcohol dependence rates were similar to that of the general population, but that depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were the most likely to persist into adulthood.

Once foster children become foster alumni, their access to mental health services diminishes (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Lenz-Rashid, 2006). However, their need for mental health support in adulthood is higher than that of the general population. As noted in one comprehensive study of foster alumni, “PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] and major depression may be the most far-reaching mental
health conditions for alumni in young adulthood” (Casey Family Programs, 2005, p. 3); PTSD rates were reported to be twice as high for foster alumni as for veterans of war.

**Minority status.** As noted earlier in this report, minorities are overrepresented in special education classrooms (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Several studies also reported that members of minority groups are disproportionately represented in foster care (e.g., Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Urquiza, Wu, & Boreggo, 1999). In Washington State, for instance, African American children represent 4.2% of the general population, but they comprise 10.5% of foster children (Children’s Alliance, 2008). In addition to racial or ethnic minority status, some foster alumni identify as sexual minorities: lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Foster alumni who identify as LGB may face negative reactions from foster parents, ranging from verbal harassment to requests for removal, and can thus be more difficult to place (Clements & Rosenwald, 2006/2007). One study that discussed the specific needs of gay and lesbian teens in foster care indicated that their numbers are not known (Freundlich & Avery, 2004).

**Social support.** Social support takes many forms for foster alumni. Many continue to have contact with their biological families, with siblings being the most frequently cited source of continued emotional connection (Corwin, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). According to Grace Runyan, a youth services case manager for foster alumni at Pierce County Alliance, siblings are “the family connection piece without any fault or blame” (personal communication, June 24, 2011). There is some indication that youth in kinship care placements are more likely to have continued contact with their biological mothers, leading to expanded social support and possibly greater resiliency in young adulthood (Metzger, 2008). Two studies cite the importance of continued contact with grandparents (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Metzger, 2008).

In general, foster alumni are often particularly adept at establishing informal social networks (Collins, 2001), yet those who have spent more years in foster care may exhibit reduced social skills (Xiong, 2007). Given that sources of social support vary widely for foster alumni, it is perhaps not surprising that some demonstrate what has been called “vigilant self-reliance,” a potential risk factor if it precludes linkage to others in
helpful ways, yet it may also be an indicator of resilience (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1198).

**Resilience.** As stated by one researcher, “Future studies should focus on resiliency rather than risk, because the research literature sufficiently documents that young people aging out of care are at a great risk for a variety of negative outcomes” (Collins, 2001, p. 281). The foster care system itself tends to focus on safety and protection rather than preparation for independence, which frustrates the desire of many teens in foster care for greater self-determination (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) defined resilience as “a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma” (p. 858), conceptualizing resilience as a response more than an innate personality trait, characterized by positive adjustment to adversity. Daining and DePanfilis (2007) created a resilience composite score based upon six domains (e.g., educational participation, avoidance of early parenthood) and found that a majority (67%) of foster alumni surveyed demonstrated high levels of resilience using that measure.

Other sources cite the importance of social context in developing resilience or a “help-seeking orientation,” noting that minority and low-income youth in particular may have trouble translating early family and community connections into connections that serve them well in adulthood (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 233). Corwin’s (2008) ethnographic interviews with six foster alumni attending a four-year college found three characteristics associated with success in college: “(a) resourcefulness in accessing college capital despite mobilities, (b) ability to discern when to invest in relationships, and (c) capacity to subsume different identities based on varying social situations and the fluctuating nature of social support” (p. 180). In a similar study, Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005) interviewed 14 foster alumni attending a four-year college and suggested a “pathway to resilience” that included individual attributes such as assertiveness and independence coupled with high expectations for the future (p. 386). Certainly, individuals respond to life stressors in a variety of ways. An analysis of youth exiting foster care found four distinct subgroups. These subgroups included one group, the
second largest in the study (38%), that appeared to have characteristics conducive to college enrollment: lowest rates of grade retention and highest levels of workforce experience (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007). The analysis reinforced the notion that foster alumni are not a homogeneous group. In sum, the literature addresses a mixture of personality traits and adaptive behaviors that may help individuals overcome adversity.

**Summary of psycho-social factors.** This section of the literature review summarized both deficits and strengths of foster alumni in relation to psychological functioning. While it is well documented that foster alumni suffer from mental health challenges at a disproportionate rate, the fact remains that the majority of foster alumni do not have a mental health diagnosis, and/or that many demonstrate resiliency in spite of psychological diagnoses or other challenges. In addition, this section reviewed other psycho-social factors that may impact foster alumni, including social support systems and minority status based on race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. The next section of the literature review explores even more fundamental needs, those related to immediate survival factors such as shelter and income.

**Basic Needs and Housing**

The extent of difficulties many young people face upon exit from foster care led one source to call it a “transition cliff” (Everychild Foundation & John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, 2006, ¶ 1). In contrast, societal expectations of continued support for young adults have lead to the concept of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469), proposed as a new developmental stage describing the transition to adulthood between about age 18 to 25. The availability of family support during this time period is an important distinction between foster alumni and other first-generation students. Between the ages of 18 and 34, parents provide an average of $38,000 to their children to help with income, schooling, housing, and other needs (Fernandes, 2007). Young adults who have “aged out” of the foster care system may not have a safety net, or their safety net may include the biological families from which they were removed. About one third of foster alumni reported that they lived with a parent or other relative, compared to about half to two-thirds of young people in general between age 18-24
(Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Maslow’s hierarchy, which is widely used to understand motivation within the context of needs, would indicate that meeting physiological and safety needs would naturally take precedence over pursing education, which would be linked to higher level needs such as “achievement and independence” (Myers, 2011, p. 342). Therefore, the ability to meet basic needs, including providing for housing, has significant potential to impact whether students persist to reach their educational goals.

**Housing and homelessness.** Having a lower level of family support undoubtedly contributes to a higher risk of homelessness, with 20-22% of foster alumni reporting that they were homeless for at least one day in the year following release from care (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; White et al., 2009). Shirk and Stangler (2004) reported that 20% of homeless youth had come directly to emergency shelters from foster care, while a more recent survey of homeless young adults in a San Francisco based study found that as many as 43% reported having a history of foster care (Lenz-Rashid, 2006). Definitions of “homeless” are not necessarily consistent across studies; yet regardless of the precise definition, a review of the literature does seem to indicate that foster alumni are more at risk for homelessness.

Aside from homelessness, foster alumni are at risk for simply shifting to another part of the public system, such as the criminal justice system or welfare (Rashid, 2004). One study found that 27% of male and 10% of female foster alumni had been incarcerated at least once after exiting care (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). More significantly, 70% of all State Penitentiary inmates in one California survey had spent time in foster care, and 50% of women who were former foster children had received welfare benefits within six years of emancipation, compared to 6% of the general female population (Everychild Foundation & John Burton Foundation for Children Without Homes, 2006). Other studies found that about one-third of foster alumni had received some form of public assistance after leaving care (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Dworsky, 2005).

Higher education, by contrast, is a step not only toward independence but to long term self-sufficiency. Yet little research exists on the practical arrangements that foster
alumni make in order to support themselves during their years as a student. Corwin (2008) interviewed students in a four-year college setting, which highlighted the importance of dormitories as a housing option. In four-year colleges, foster alumni may seek to remain in dormitories during school breaks; in community colleges, with few exceptions, students do not have the option of dormitory living at all.

**Employment and self-support.** Closely related to the issue of housing is income; both are basic needs, and they are interrelated since income is necessary to support stable housing. Several studies (e.g., Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mason et al., 2003) indicated that foster alumni have difficulty earning enough income to be fully self-supporting upon exit from care, and that their rates of employment and earnings lag behind others in their age cohort. One factor that may contribute to a lack of preparedness to enter the world of work is that foster parents face liability issues in relation to allowing teenagers in their care to drive or to work (Shirk & Stangler, 2004; Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2002).

Another factor impacting the ability of foster alumni to be self-supporting is the situation of early parenthood. Several studies have indicated high rates of early parenthood amongst former foster children, with young women in foster care becoming pregnant by age 19 at twice the rate of their non-foster peers (Boonstra, 2011). Another source reported four times the likelihood that “transition age adults” (age 18-21) who were former foster children would have at least one dependent (Southerland, Casanueva, & Ringeisen, 2009, p. 952). Early parenting is a reality for a disproportionate number of foster alumni and could therefore be a consideration in making arrangements for college attendance and employment. Child care costs can be a significant barrier to employment or education for young parents. According to the Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network (2011), the 2010 median rate in child care centers was $895 per month for an infant or $750 per month for a toddler.

In conclusion, foster alumni experience economic difficulties at higher rates than other young adults, and economic concerns are compounded for those who become
parents at an early age. And while college education can help increase earning capacity in the long term, the challenge of meeting basic needs in the short term remains.

**Summary of basic needs and housing.** The literature review indicates that foster alumni are at higher risk than other young adults for homelessness or for continued public support through the criminal justice or state welfare system. It could be argued that homelessness and incarceration are simply alternate forms of out-of-home care, since many homeless youth report that they are escaping abuse or parental neglect (Giffords, Alonso, & Bell, 2007), the same issues from which foster care seeks to protect them. Undoubtedly related to housing concerns is the fact that foster alumni are typically not well prepared to be self-supporting upon exit from care, and they are more likely to be parents at a young age. Delayed emancipation is one strategy being utilized to ease the transition from foster care to self sufficiency; this approach, along with other laws and policies aimed at supporting foster alumni as they enter adulthood, will be described in the next section.

**Legislation and Higher Education Programs for Foster Alumni**

Services for foster children beyond the age of 18—as they become foster youth or foster alumni—have increased in recent years. Since young adulthood coincides with traditional college age, it seems appropriate that some of the services for children who have “aged out” of foster care could be situated within publicly-supported colleges.

**Legislation benefitting foster alumni.** Services to first-generation college students extend back to 1964 with the establishment of federal TRIO programs, which originated with the Johnson administration’s “War on Poverty.” The term TRIO refers to the three original programs—Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Special Services for Disadvantaged Students—all of which were “progressive” efforts at social change (United States Department of Education, 2009, ¶ 1). Language has been added to TRIO program mandates to specifically include foster alumni (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act has also been modified over the years to include additional services for youth transitioning from foster care, as well as to strengthen state services related to adoption (Courtney, Dworsky, & Peters, 2009).
Recently, a more significant change benefiting foster alumni was made to the Social Security Act. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act ("Fostering Connections Act") was enacted in 2008; it allows funding for states that extend foster care to age 21 for youth who meet certain criteria, including enrollment in high school completion or post-secondary programs (Courtney, Dworsky, & Peters, 2009). In Washington, foster care support has been authorized up to age 21 for youth who are enrolled in college, including vocational training (Independence for Foster Youth, 2011).

Presently, California is the most proactive in providing services to foster alumni in the community colleges. For instance, the California Community Colleges Chancellors Office supports the Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI), a collaborative effort among California agencies serving foster alumni. There is a designated FYSI contact at every college, as well as an FYSI instruction manual for financial aid officers (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2009).

The federal Education Training Voucher (ETV), which is administered by the states, provides up to $5,000 per year for eligible foster alumni; it is available nationwide (Davis & Losey, 2008). Youth must enroll before age 21 and can receive aid until age 23 (ETV Program, 2010). In 2001, Washington State created the Governor’s Scholarship, which awards funding to approximately 30 foster alumni students each year (College Success Foundation, 2008). Washington State legislation also initiated a Passport to College Promise Scholarship program in 2007. The program is a six-year pilot, with its first full year of operation in 2009; its three components are: (a) pre-college outreach to foster youth age 14-18, (b) institutional support services targeted to foster alumni, and (c) scholarships for foster alumni. Eligibility for the Passport scholarships includes having spent at least one year in foster care after age 16; emancipation from foster care on or after January 1, 2007; half-time enrollment in an eligible college before age 22, with completion before age 27; and Washington residency (Washington State Legislature, 2008). Passport disbursements to students attending community and technical colleges in 2008-2009 were more than double the amount disbursed for public and private four year
college scholarships combined (Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009, p. 8).

**College services for foster alumni.** This section of the literature review provided an overview of current services for foster alumni in two-year colleges, with a focus on Washington State. According to the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (2010), the majority (approximately 75%) of foster alumni who accessed higher education between 2008 and 2010 enrolled in two-year colleges. This number is higher than the 55% cited by Herlocker (2006), based upon data gathered at institutions of higher education in Florida. It is likely that numbers vary by state, but given the factors outlined above—academic preparedness in particular—it also seems likely that foster alumni will continue to view community colleges and their open-door policies as good options. A conservative estimate would be that more than half of foster alumni will continue to enter higher education through the doors of two-year colleges.

Support for foster alumni pursuing higher education falls into three major categories. One is basic living assistance, such as that supported by the national Fostering Connections Act, which links continued federal support with secondary or post-secondary enrollment. In Washington State, extending foster care to age 21 has been shown to correlate with higher rates of college attendance and lower rates of public assistance and other negative outcomes, such that for every dollar spent on the program, $1.35 was saved (Burley & Lee, 2010). A second category is direct scholarship or college enrollment assistance, exemplified by programs such as the Education Training Voucher (ETV Program, 2010) and the Passport to College Promise Scholarship (Independence for Foster Youth, 2011). A third category of service, which could loosely be termed “support services” or “case management,” corresponds to student services or student affairs functions, with the extent of targeted services varying greatly one college to another.

**Summary of legislation and college services.** Targeted educational services for youth “aging out” of foster care have increased in recent years, due in part to supporting legislation. Services still vary widely state to state (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel,
2008) and college to college. In Washington State, the “Foster Care to College Partnership,” established with a memorandum of understanding in 2005, brought together the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, the College Success Foundation, the Department of Social and Health Services, Treehouse (a non-profit organization serving foster children and youth), the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Casey Family Programs, a promising partnership to benefit foster youth and alumni seeking access to higher education (Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009). Whether the momentum to support foster children beyond age 18 that has been building in recent years can be sustained, in spite of the budget constraints that are affecting state-funded agencies and colleges at the time of this writing, remains to be seen.

**Conclusion**

This review provided an overview of research findings related to foster alumni’s college readiness and persistence: (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social factors, and (c) meeting basic needs, especially housing. An overview of recent legislation and college efforts targeted to foster alumni was also included. While relatively few studies have been conducted on young people who have “aged out” of foster care in relation to higher education (i.e., turned 18 without being adopted or returned to their families of origin), studies on foster children provide related information and, in many cases, the findings are relevant to college readiness, particularly in relation to academic achievement while in the K-12 system. Studies that directly address foster alumni in higher education to date are focused on four-year college settings, yet the literature shows that foster alumni are more likely to access higher education via two-year colleges. As a whole, foster alumni have lower academic levels and rates of high school completion; are more likely to experience psychological distress; have fewer economic resources and less of a social support system to rely upon; and are more likely to experience homelessness. This group of young adults is at risk compared to the general population, yet the majority of foster alumni do not fit the negative labels that could be placed upon them if one were
to focus solely upon the deficits highlighted in the literature. Resilience is a reality for many, and a possibility for all.

**Considerations for Practice and Future Research**

This review of the literature highlighted a number of areas in which foster alumni are likely to struggle as they embark upon the transition to adulthood. These struggles, in turn, are likely impact their success in college. Implications for college services and further research in this area are suggested below.

**Advocacy and College Services**

As Danielle Dressel, a foster alumna and peer mentor with Pierce County Alliance stated, “Foster youth don’t like being called high risk” (personal communication, May 13, 2011). Her statement underscores the need to evaluate each student’s abilities individually while being prepared to offer assistance if needed. My primary purpose in conducting this literature review was to provide information that may be useful to individual foster alumni and to self-advocacy groups. Such groups will no doubt be mindful of the needs of those who demonstrate the deficits outlined here as potential barriers to college success (e.g., a need for remediation prior to enrolling in college classes) and seek to remedy those deficits, while recognizing that not all of their members will have those deficits. Continued efforts at the systems level, such as linkage between state agencies responsible for child welfare and school districts responsible for their education, would seem appropriate. These efforts could include reducing school mobility and earlier identification of highly capable foster children so that their potential for college attendance could be encouraged. Advocacy groups will undoubtedly be involved in both defending current levels of funding for foster alumni (e.g., Foster Care to 21 initiatives) at a time of budget constraints and promoting expansions of services where possible.

My secondary purpose was to provide information to guide community college leaders as they make decisions about campus services for foster alumni. The students we see enter our doors at the colleges, even if they need some remedial coursework, have overcome significant barriers to make it that far, and their resilience and persistence
should be recognized. They need and deserve continued support, but also should not be hindered by negative labels. First, referrals for mental health services, the potential need for which has been well established in the literature, is a student services function offered at many colleges that may be particularly helpful to foster alumni. A second consideration, as suggested by Corwin (2008), is to provide comprehensive support services that include “bridging relationships,” relationships which lead to useful information and network support but were not necessarily psychologically-intense “bonding” relationships (p. 173). Third, based upon risk factors identified in the literature, it could be advisable for colleges to establish strong partnerships with community organizations that can provide housing assistance, as foster alumni may be at greater risk of homelessness as they often have less of a “safety net” than other young adults. In addition to housing assistance, foster alumni are likely to benefit from services which are generally available to all students, or which may be provided through TRIO programs for first-generation students, such as tutoring and advising. Finally, since foster alumni are underrepresented in higher education, building a pipeline to college through collaboration with those who are responsible for foster children (e.g., child welfare, K-12), could help to increase the number of college-ready and college-enrolled foster alumni.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The majority of foster alumni will likely access higher education through the doors of community and technical colleges, yet the research to date that addresses their experiences in college is focused solely upon four-year college settings. More research is needed that addresses the experiences of foster alumni in the community colleges, as well as research that takes a holistic view of their pathway from K-12 through (a) transferrable programs in the community colleges and on to universities, to include advanced degrees; or (b) workforce education at the two-year level.

An additional area of study that would be informative, as relatively few studies were located on the topic, would be to address the experiences and needs of sexual minority foster youth as they reach adulthood. Given the changes in society in recent
years as indicated by legislation allowing gay marriage, which is legal in six states at the
time of this writing (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011), examining the
particular experiences and developmental path of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and
Transgender (LGBT) foster alumni would seem to be an area worthy of further study.

In relation to methods, additional qualitative studies on all aspects related to foster
children and foster alumni would be informative. The majority of studies identified
through this review were quantitative in nature and, by virtue of their scale, did not
illustrate individual perspectives. While a few qualitative studies were identified (e.g.,
Corwin, 2008; Shirk & Stangler, 2004) as well as a policy brief that included quotes from
foster alumni (Davis & Losey, 2008), the great majority of studies returned on the topic
of foster children or foster alumni utilized quantitative research methods. While these
studies are valuable, qualitative (or mixed-method studies) could provide context and
depth to our understanding of the topic and would serve to give voice to the many foster
children and alumni behind the numbers. If, as stated by Bruskas (2008), foster children
have experienced marginalization, exploitation, and powerlessness, then addressing their
perceptions and collective experiences through qualitative research methods has the
potential to both add to the body of knowledge in this area and to be empowering as well.
References


Chapter 3

Manuscript #2
Supporting Independence: A Collective Case Study of Foster Alumni in Community and Technical Colleges

by

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Chapter 3
Supporting Independence: A Collective Case Study of Foster Alumni in Community and Technical Colleges

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (2010) reported that 550 foster youth transitioned out of care in 2008, the most recent year for which statistics were available. This number is compatible with a national figure showing that approximately 20,000 to 24,000 foster youth emancipate from the system each year (Nancy, 2008; Vacca, 2008). Foster alumni may be considered a subset of first-generation students, due both to being legal wards of the state and to the likelihood that their biological parents were less likely to be college educated (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Yet there is evidence that foster alumni have particular needs that differ from, and extend beyond, those of other first-generation students. They have experienced separation from their families during their formative years, and in addition, they have been required to establish independence earlier than most other young adults. According to Casey Family Programs (2010b, p. 9), “Many arrive at college in a survival mode.”

For a variety of reasons, a majority of foster alumni choose community and technical colleges as their pathway to higher education (Herlocker, 2006; Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2010). This collective case study, working from a critical social science or social justice perspective, describes the experiences of 10 foster alumni enrolled at two different two-year colleges (one community college and one technical college) in Washington State. I interviewed student and staff participants at the two sites and reviewed related student records (e.g., transcripts, entrance scores), then summarized individual cases and compiled a cross-case analysis. The study focused on three areas, identified through a review of the literature: (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social factors, and (c) meeting basic needs. A fourth area of review covers recent legislation and college services for foster alumni, with an emphasis on Washington State.
Critical Social Science

Theoretical Perspective

Critical social science is a useful lens through which to view situations where fundamental inequalities in power, including status and resources, exist (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011), as is the case with foster youth. The term “social justice” is also used to describe an approach to research that includes an emotional or political affiliation with participants as well as a goal of advocacy, not just collection of data (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 475). Working from a social justice perspective, my primary goal in conducting this study is to provide information that may be useful to individual study participants, to other individual foster alumni, and to self-advocacy groups such as Passion to Action, a Washington State foster alumni advisory group (Independence for Foster Youth, 2010).

My secondary goal is to add to the scholarly body of knowledge and, in particular, to provide information to community college leaders that will help them recognize the needs of this distinct group. Having a better understanding of the needs of foster alumni may help with the planning of direct services and with the creation or enhancement of community partnerships. Through this study, I aim to illustrate the experiences of foster youth as they bridge the gap between dependency on state care to independent adulthood, with community college acting as the setting and the means for that initial step.

Social Justice Implications for Disadvantaged Populations

At present, foster alumni are significantly underrepresented in the college system; one source notes that only 10% of foster alumni enter post-secondary programs as compared to 60% of the general population (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Foster alumni may be considered a subset of first-generation students, due both to being legal wards of the state and to the likelihood that their biological parents were less likely to be college educated (Burley & Halpern, 2001). According to one study, 59% of first-generation students had enrolled in some form of higher education within two years of high school graduation, compared to 93% from families in which at least one parent had a bachelor’s degree, the demarcation point for non first-generation (Choy, 2001). Thus, foster
alumni’s rates of access to higher education fall far below those of other first generation students, who in turn access college at much lower levels than students whose parents have degrees. In addition to fitting the designation of first-generation student, foster alumni are also more likely to be low income and of color, two additional factors that correlate with lower college completion rates (Thayer, 2000).

The social justice implications of college access are evident through the effects of higher education on earnings. While a four-year degree is required for certain occupations, even one year of college plus a credential often has a positive impact upon earning potential (Prince, 2008), and full-time workers with an associate’s degree earn, on average, about 25% more than someone with a high school diploma (Day & Newburger, 2002). One study of patterns of enrollment for foster alumni in higher education showed that approximately three-fourths of the participants planned to attend community college or vocational training (Herlocker, 2006). Community colleges typically enroll greater numbers of students from low-income, minority, and first-generation backgrounds than do universities (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996) and are therefore positioned to positively impact foster alumni, who share many of these characteristics and are more likely to begin their education at a two-year college.

**Definition of Terms**

Following are some of the key concepts and terms used in this study. When possible, definitions have been drawn from the literature.

**Foster Care**

“Foster care is a living arrangement for children who a child protective services worker or a court has decided cannot live safely at home. Foster care arrangements include non-relative foster homes, relative foster homes (also known as ‘kinship care’), group homes, institutions, and pre-adoptive homes” (ChildTrends, 2003, ¶ 13). The goal of foster care was typically to reunite children with their families when possible; over the years, there has been increasing recognition that reunion is not always in the child’s best interest, in which case stability in placement and contact with siblings are important goals (Lau, Litrownik, Newton, & Landsverk, 2003; Martyna, 2007).
**Foster Alumni**

The term “foster alumni” is used here to differentiate those who are 18 and older and have “aged out” of the foster care system (i.e., turned 18 without being returned to their families of origin or adopted) from “foster children,” meaning those under age 18. The term “aged out” is used in the literature to describe these youth; “emancipated” is also used (Shirk & Stangler, 2004, p. vii; Vacca, 2008, p. 485). One student participant, when asked about use of the terms “youth” vs. “alumni,” said using “foster alumni” was preferable, because “It’s like you graduated from being in foster care, but ‘foster youth’ sounds like you’re still in it.”

**First-Generation Student**

The authorizing legislation for TRIO defines a first-generation college student as “an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (Higher Education Act of 1965/1998, p. 3). For purposes of this study, foster alumni—being former wards of the state—are considered a subcategory of first-generation college students. Additionally, foster alumni are more likely than average to report that their biological parents did not attend college (Burley & Halpern, 2001). One area in which foster alumni and other first-generation students overlap most directly is in the area of kinship care; about one-fourth of foster children are placed with relatives, often in low-income households with concomitant barriers to higher education (Wolanin, 2005). However, to differentiate the two groups, the term “first-generation college student” will be used in the present study to indicate non-foster alumni.

**Homeless**

The federal definition of “homeless individual” is one who “lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” or “who has a primary nighttime residence that is a…shelter…or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” (“Homeless Assistance,” 2010, §11301). In addressing the situation of foster alumni, the notion of “couch surfing” must also be considered, a term used to describe “relying upon peer networks as resources for survival” (Perez & Romo, 2011, p. 239). Couch surfing, defined here as depending upon
temporary sleeping arrangements with friends or acquaintances, meets the federal
definition of homelessness in terms of lacking a fixed and regular nighttime residence but
does not extend as far as living in a temporary shelter or on the street.

**Background**

The research findings in relation to foster alumni as a whole are not encouraging
in relation to college readiness. For instance, they are less likely to have graduated from
high school, more likely to experience psychological difficulties into adulthood, and
often struggle with employment and self-support. Yet these general statements mask the
fact that a majority of foster alumni do not fit into all of these categories, or into any one
category. In conducting this study, I therefore sought to balance a need to highlight
barriers to college success with reporting the many strengths of this group of students, as
identified through the literature and through the study’s findings.

**Academics**

As a group, foster youth demonstrate lower academic achievement during their K-
12 years; they are more likely to be held back a grade (Scherr, 2007; Zetlin & Weinberg,
2004) and tend to perform at lower levels on standardized testing (Burley & Halpern,
2001; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008). In addition, foster children are
more likely to be assigned to special education classes, with estimates of 25% to as high
as 50%, as compared to 10% of the general population (Geenen & Powers, 2006;
Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008; Zetlin, 2006). In turn, special
education status is a predictor for dropping out of high school (Lehr, 2004). Overall,
foster alumni’s high school completion rates fall between 50% and 64% (McMillen,
Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Wolanin, 2005), compared to 75% for the
general population (Chapman, Laird, & Kewalramani, 2010). School mobility (i.e.,
frequent changes in schools) has been suggested as one possible factor impacting the
academic performance of foster alumni (e.g., Pecora et al., 2006).

**Psycho-Social Factors**

Given the potential influence of pre-existing factors, early trauma, and
involvement in the foster care system, there is a body of research indicating that foster
alumni as a whole experience mental health concerns at a higher rate than average (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2005; ChildTrends, 2003; Goerge et al., 1992; White et al., 2009). Depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were found to be the most likely conditions to persist into adulthood (Casey Family Programs, 2005).

Foster children, and therefore foster alumni, are also more likely to be members of minority groups (Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Thayer, 2000), who may or may not be placed with foster families that share their background. Interpersonal support may take the form of continued contact with biological families, especially siblings (Corwin, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Some foster alumni also demonstrate “vigilant self-reliance” (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1198) and “resilience…a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma” (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). One study, examining foster alumni’s outcomes in six domains related to resilience, found that a majority (67%) demonstrated high levels of that construct (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

Basic Needs

The time period between approximately age 18 and age 25 has been called “emerging adulthood” by some theorists (e.g., Arnett, 2000, p. 469), a period in which full independence is not yet expected. Young adults receive, on average about $38,000 from their parents through age 34 (Fernandes, 2007), and half to two-thirds of young adults up to age 24 live with a parent or other relative (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). Contrast this level of support with that of foster alumni: About one-third report that they live with a parent or relative (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009), yet these would be the same families from which they were removed and therefore unlikely to constitute a stable option.

Lower levels of family support may lead to a higher risk of homelessness, with just over 20% of foster alumni reporting that they were homeless for at least one day in the year following release from care (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; White et al., 2009). Foster alumni are also at risk for shifting to another part of the public system, given higher rates of incarceration and receipt of public assistance (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-
As a whole, they also struggle with earning enough to be self-sufficient (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mason et al., 2003). With all of these factors as potential barriers, meeting basic needs at a level sufficient not only to enroll in college but to persist with one’s studies may present a challenge.

**Community College Services for Foster Alumni**

Federal TRIO programs, first established in 1964, serve first-generation college students (United States Department of Education, 2009); language has been added to TRIO mandates to specifically include foster alumni (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Recent changes to the Social Security Act have also benefitted foster alumni, allowing funding for states to extend foster care to age 21 for youth who meet certain criteria, including enrollment in secondary or post-secondary education (Courtney, Dworsky, & Peters, 2009).

Washington State is among the states that have extended foster care support to age 21 for some youth (up to 50 per year) who are enrolled in college, including vocational training (Burley & Lee, 2010). In addition, the federal Education Training Voucher program (ETV), which is administered by the states, provides up to $5,000 per year for eligible foster alumni (Davis & Losey, 2008). State scholarship programs for foster alumni in Washington include the Passport to College and the Governor’s Scholarship (College Success Foundation, 2008; Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009). College support for foster alumni falls into three major categories: basic living assistance, as exemplified by Foster Care to 21 support programs; scholarship programs such as Passport to College and ETV; and on-campus support services for foster alumni (i.e., advocacy, foster alumni clubs), which vary considerably from one college to another.

**Method**

This study used the collective case study method, and both research sites and individual participants were identified through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. I collected data from a total of 14 participants at the two sites, using an interview protocol and review of relevant case records. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; both individual case and cross-case analysis was performed, and findings were evaluated in relation to the literature.
Collective Case Study

Consistent with the collective case study method, data were compiled from multiple cases related to the focus of study (Creswell, 2008). Stake (2000) described the collective case study as “an instrumental [individual] study extended to several cases” (p. 437). Similarly, Stake (2006) described the concept of a “quintain,” the issue under study which is addressed through investigation of multiple related cases. This collective case study focused on describing the experiences of particular foster alumni in two-year colleges (the quintain), and interpreting the findings through the perspective of critical social science or social justice (e.g., Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Although a protocol was used, interviews were semi-structured and allowed for individual perspectives and emerging themes (Patton, 2002). In keeping with the case study method, information was gathered through staff interviews and written records in addition to the student participant interviews.

Site Selection and Participants

Two colleges—one community college and one technical college—located in Washington State were chosen for inclusion in the study. Both sites had a sufficient number of identified foster alumni enrolled and afforded geographical proximity to aid in timely collection of data. Selection was therefore a mix of purposeful sampling, also called “purposive sampling” by some researchers (e.g., Patten, 2009, p. 51) and convenience sampling (Merriam, 1998).

Participants were identified who met the age guidelines of 18-26. Focusing on this age group allowed consistency with recent legislation for emancipated foster alumni and avoided confounding traditional versus non-traditional student issues, which were not the focus of the present study. However, one 29 year old student was included due to the particular experience he was able to share, which was independent of his current age. His case served as an example of an outlier (Lichtman, 2006), which therefore helped to provide a richer description of the varied backgrounds of foster alumni. Staff participants were chosen based on their direct involvement with foster alumni services.
I interviewed a total of 10 students, four at one college site and six at another; I also interviewed two staff members at each site, for a total of 14 interviews. Of the 10 students interviewed, six were female and four were male; five were members of racial/ethnic minority groups. As indicated by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), the number of participants necessary to reach saturation in qualitative research is difficult to determine; they found evidence of saturation for meta-themes with six interviewees, followed by data saturation with 12 interviewees. Shkedi (2005) proposed including up to 10 cases when utilizing the collective case study method. With a total of 14 interviews (10 students and four staff members), themes emerged at a sufficient level to support the findings while allowing for depth of analysis, an important factor in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2006).

**Focus of Study**

The guiding question for this study was “What are the experiences of foster alumni in the community colleges?” Focused areas of inquiry were identified based upon a review of the literature: (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social factors, and (c) meeting basic needs, particularly housing, while a fourth section provides an overview of recent legislation and educational service enhancements targeted for foster alumni.

I utilized interview protocols designed to assist me in conducting semi-structured interviews with student and staff participants. Answers to the interview questions, along with related themes that emerged, comprised most of the data needed for this study. Consistent with the case study method, and as a form of triangulation, case records and documentation related to the focus of study were also gathered and reviewed.

**Data Collection Procedures and Analysis**

Interviews with staff and student participants were held at the two college sites over a six month period. As recommended by Lichtman (2006), I used audio taping and transcription to record and process individual interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with separate protocols for students and staff; duration varied from 30-70 minutes, and I transcribed the recordings verbatim. Demographic information was obtained for student participants. Transcripts, entrance scores, and other
related case records were then provided to me by the site contacts or “gatekeepers” (Creswell, 2008, p. 219), based upon releases of information signed by the interviewees.

To increase internal validity and trustworthiness of the study’s findings, I employed three customary methods (e.g., Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Shkedi, 2005). The first method consisted of triangulation of data; consistent with the collective case study method, multiple sources of information were gathered, and multiple interviews were conducted. Further, the staff interviews served as triangulation of student self-reports, and the written data (such as entrance scores) served as triangulation of information on key points. A second method focused on member checks; findings were discussed with a total of six participants (three students and three staff members). A third method, which overlaps to some extent with both triangulation and member checks, involved “peer examination” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). The staff participant reviews served both as triangulation and as a form of peer examination.

To aid in cross-case analysis, I employed a method recommended by Ruona (2005), in which functions of Microsoft Word are used in lieu of specialized qualitative analysis software. The transcript documents were formatted into tables; responses were coded and then grouped using the “sort” function. I also created an Excel spreadsheet which compiled student data on key point. See Table 1, which provides some demographic information on the participants. By using both individual case narratives and group analysis, I sought to maintain the data generated by “multiple perspectives” (Creswell, 2008, p. 257), so that the richness of individual experience would not be lost as responses were aggregated.
One goal of this study is to add to the body of knowledge as related to foster alumni, particularly those in community college settings. Although broad generalization is not applicable with the case study method, individual and collective case studies are appropriate methods to “contribute to scientific development” in a particular field and can provide depth of information (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 304). Results of this collective case study have been summarized individually below, followed by cross-case analysis and emerging themes.

**Overview of Individual Case Summaries**

Case summaries for the 10 students interviewed have been grouped according to college sites. In order to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms have been used and some identifying details have been omitted. In particular, some details which might reveal a student’s identity if included in the individual case summaries (e.g., age at entry to foster care; precise racial or ethnic identification) have been reserved for reporting in the aggregate. Pseudonyms were chosen from a list of the most popular male and female names for people born in the 1990s (Social Security Online, 2010), the decade in which many of the participants were born. Similarly, some identifying details about the two college sites have been expressed in more general terms. In writing the student case summaries, I utilized a method based upon Yin (2009), in which presenting each

**Table 1**

*Overview of Participant Demographics (10 total participants)*

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<tr>
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<th>Mean</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21.2 years</td>
<td>18-29 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age of entry to foster care</td>
<td>8.7 years</td>
<td>birth-15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial minority</td>
<td>5 (total)</td>
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</tbody>
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summary in the same format allows readers to begin to recognize for themselves some of the cross-case themes.

**Site One**

Site One was a technical college, which in Washington State is part of the two-year college system. Given the workforce education focus of technical colleges, it was perhaps not surprising that only one of the four students at this site identified a long-term career goal that would require a four-year degree. The college is located in a suburban area and has two staff members providing the majority of foster alumni services along with their other job duties, one in financial aid and one in advising. The latter, an advisor, addresses foster alumni needs along with his other responsibilities, promoting funding and “club” services to foster alumni on campus and serving as case manager for those who self-identify. He also runs a blog to keep foster alumni up to date on college events and support services available. The technical college serves approximately 27 self-identified foster alumni students per year. A follow up six months after the interviews showed that two of the four students who had participated in the study had just graduated, while the remaining two were still enrolled.

**Participant Case Summaries: Site One**

Marissa, age 21, had only five classes left at the time of the interview. She was supporting herself through a combination of financial aid grants and loans as well as assistance from her boyfriend; she indicated that she was also looking for a job. She reported one period of homelessness, having been “kicked out” by her foster parents at age 15 and thereafter staying with friends. Her stated goal was to become a psychologist or work in a related position. Marissa is a high school graduate (she estimated her GPA at 2.1) and reported having done well in grade school. In response to the question about who motivated her to attend college, she indicated that her adoptive mother (having been adopted at age 15) “gave me motivation to [go to college], I guess. But not inspiration… that’s just what motivated me to go to school, because she said that I wasn’t going to be anything.”
Lauren, age 20, is married (she was the only one of the 10 students interviewed who was married) and had one child who was 9 months old at the time of the interview. Lauren took one quarter off of school during summer and then “failed a couple quarters, but I’m doing a little bit better now…I’ve got the support and assistance I need.” Her husband worked, and she also reported receiving several sources of financial aid. Lauren indicated that she had been homeless immediately upon exiting foster care: “As soon as I turned 18, my foster parents told me that I needed to move out…it was my birthday, it was a Sunday.” She lived with friends and an aunt before finally getting her own place. She is a high school graduate who attended 10 different elementary schools and three different middle schools while she was still living with her biological mother. However, Lauren stated that “I kept my grades good, and no matter what happened, I remembered that I had to do good.” Her goals related to business management, accounting, or medical billing. In regard to motivation to attend college, she said, “I wanted to go to college so I could get a better life than what my mom had,” and also noted that she wanted to show her grandparents—who perceived her as being similar to her mother—that she was different.

Daniel, age 19, was enrolled in his first quarter at the college and was taking academic courses prior to entering a welding program. His sources of income included financial aid, rent assistance from an alumni housing program in the community, a part-time job, and Disability Lifeline payments related to a mental health diagnosis. Daniel was incarcerated during his sophomore year of high school and subsequently finished a G.E.D. Prior to incarceration, he reported having had a high school G.P.A. of 3.3 to 3.6. Daniel reported that he had been identified for gifted education during grade school, but changed schools often enough that he was not able to participate in gifted programs for long. He had initially wanted to go into a psychology or counseling-related field but indicated he was unable to do so because of his conviction. Therefore, he chose welding instead, viewing it as a potentially lucrative occupation; he also reported a desire to possibly run his own business some day. In regard to motivation to attend college, he noted that his major source of motivation was “Me… academics have always been my
Jasmine, age 19, was in her fifth quarter in a cosmetology program. Of all the students interviewed, she was the only one living in a “Foster Care to 21” situation, which appeared to provide her with considerable practical and personal support; she reported financial aid and Foster Care to 21 as forms of funding. She is a high school graduate who reported earning good grades in all subjects “except math.” Jasmine also reported doing well overall in grade school. In regard to motivation to attend college, she cited her current foster mother as a major influence: “She pretty much said, ‘It’s your education, however you want…’ I mean, she’s the type that doesn’t want to see failure. So it’s kind of like…living at her house, you have to do it or you’re going to, like, feel like you disappointed her.”

Site Two

Site Two was a community college located in a major urban area. The college had two full-time staff members devoted solely to foster alumni students and thus was able to offer extensive support services. The college reported having just over 200 students who self-identified as having been in the foster care system upon enrollment, with approximately 36 of those students actively involved with foster alumni services at the college. All six of the students interviewed at this site expressed a desire to transfer to a university and earn a four-year degree, and their job goals (e.g., teacher, lawyer) reflected the need for education beyond the two-year level. Some of the services offered at this college included club meetings (which were promoted without using the word “foster” care or alumni); vouchers and incentives for attending events; and tutoring and counseling in collaboration with the on-campus TRIO program.

Given that the two staff members were able to dedicate themselves full-time to foster alumni services, they were readily available to talk with students when needed as informal mentors. The program also employed a number of foster alumni students through WorkStudy, which allowed these students to both receive support from staff and to give support to other students from foster care backgrounds. Six month follow up
showed that five of the six student participants were still enrolled; one had dropped out of college due to “financial and legal problems,” but with the hope of returning. The college itself, as is true of many others at the time of this writing, has been impacted by budget cuts. Services for foster youth had been modified from the original comprehensive model, offering instead a more general advocacy or “concierge” role, with one full-time staff member rather than two.

**Participant Case Summaries: Site Two**

**Kendra**, age 21, was in her fifth quarter of attendance; she had experienced one gap in her schooling already related to being homeless for a time. She was supporting herself through a part-time job as well as financial aid and food stamps. Kendra is a high school graduate, and reported a high school GPA of 2.8. She also reported having earned good grades in elementary school: “In elementary school I was a good writer. They’d be like, ‘Write a sentence with this word in it’ and I’d write a paragraph.” Her goal was to earn an Associate of Arts degree, transfer to a university, and then enter law school. Kendra’s long-term goal of becoming a lawyer was influenced by her experiences with the foster care system:

I want to be a person who makes decisions…who changes somebody else’s life…people in social work, all they do is listen to other people and they just go by a whole bunch of rules…I want to be the person that, if they told me [about a problem], I’d do something about it then right there.

In regard to motivation to attend college, Kendra indicated that her biological family encouraged her early on to strive for a better life: “They’d be like, ‘This is where this life leads you. Go do something different. You know, you’re going to be the one to make it. You’re going to get up out of here.’ ”

**Derrick**, age 22, was born overseas and came to the United States at age 9. At the time of the interview he was enrolled in his ninth quarter in college, but the quarters were not consecutive; he had experienced two disruptions to his schooling related to homelessness, including one gap of two years. He reported that he was receiving rent assistance from a community housing program for alumni. He also indicated that he received limited financial aid assistance and food stamps and was working odd jobs at
times, mostly fixing cars. Derrick is a high school graduate who entered school in the United States in the third grade. He was tutored in English at the school, and he also indicated that he learned English quickly since he was placed in foster homes where it was the only language spoken. His goal was engineering, and he reported having heard about college initially through his foster care experience: “I lived in about 16 different foster homes. Some of them, they went to college, they were going to college. I heard a lot of stories about college.” Derrick also indicated that his biological brother and sister, who are also living in the United States, encouraged him to attend.

**Felicia,** age 18, was also born overseas but, unlike Derrick, grew up speaking a dialect of English. However, her accent was so strong that she was initially misplaced in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Her independence was already showing when, at the age of seven, she found a way to move out of the ESL classes: “I went to my regular classes and they would come looking for me every day and I’d be in my class. And finally they left me alone.” At the time of the interview, Felicia was in her first quarter of college. In addition to the rent assistance, she indicated receiving various forms of financial aid; she had also worked part-time in the past and was looking for another job. At 18, Felicia was a recent high school graduate who reported having earned good grades in school, with a GPA of 2.5 to 3.5. Like Kendra, her goal was to become a lawyer, but Felicia was less specific about the area of law that interested her. Her motivation to attend college was “Myself… I always wanted to go to college. I wanted to be something.”

**Anthony,** age 23, was enrolled in his first quarter at the community college but had also attended a vocational school while living in another state. He indicated that financial aid was his only source of funding. He is a high school graduate who reported having taken night classes and summer classes as a form of “escape” from life in his foster home. Anthony reported having learned to read by about age four or five but was placed in special education classes during grade school for behavioral reasons. While still living in another state, he reported having experience periods of homelessness: “The great thing about campus is they don’t kick you off a couch mid-day…Yeah, I’m an A
student when things are going well in my life…[but] when I’m homeless…my transcript is littered with, here’s a great class and here’s an F.” His career goal is to become a psychologist; he indicated that he wanted to teach psychology and also have a private practice. When asked about his motivation to attend college, he indicated that many of his friends came to him for counsel, noting “this is a social function that I serve.” He expressed a realization that becoming a psychologist was what he was meant to do.

Andrea, age 20, was beginning her second year in college; she reported that she was working two part-time jobs while going to school. In addition, she was receiving some forms of financial aid but had lost her eligibility for the Educational Training Voucher (ETV) at one point, which in turn affected her ability to receive rent assistance. Due to circumstances surrounding her family of origin, she did not attend formal schooling until midway through elementary school. Andrea expressed having felt “overwhelmed” at times after enrolling in college and therefore dropped some classes, which led to being placed on academic probation. (Her transcript showed that she withdrew from a total of six classes during her first three quarters of attendance.) She did not report having been “homeless,” but she did live with a female friend and then a boyfriend after leaving foster care, which would qualify as “couch surfing.” Andrea is a high school graduate, and her goal is to work with young children or possibly teach in an elementary or middle school. In relation to college goals, she indicated that she had been influenced by a boyfriend in high school whom she perceived to be “really smart.” As a result of that relationship, Andrea began to take school more seriously herself and to think about college: “I didn’t think I’d be smart enough or get good enough grades to be accepted anywhere. And that’s what made me decide to go to community college, because they accept people…you don’t have to have the pristine grade point average in order to get in.”

Brian, age 29, was included in the study even though he was just beyond the target age of 26 due to the unique story he was able to share, having entered foster care via the juvenile justice system. He had been the only child of a single mother who was working full-time. He reported that he would skip school after his mother went to work
and that he began to get into trouble with the law at age 13. By age 15 he was identified as an “at-risk youth” and reported that “I was in juvie from age 14 to age 18… I was in juvie 90% of the time.” When not in a juvenile correctional facility, he was in foster care. At age 16, while in the correctional system, he earned a GED. His early schooling had held more promise; he reported that, in grade school, “I was the smart kid; I paid a lot of attention. I did a lot of work. And middle school is when it started going downhill and I started acting up.” He reported having been homeless at times after leaving the corrections system. Brian reported that he was ineligible for some of the specific foster care scholarships due to his age but did receive Pell grants and the Washington State Needs Grant. His goal was to become a special needs teacher, working with elementary or middle school aged children, and he indicated that his legal record does not include assault or other charges that would preclude working as a teacher. His decision to attend college was not influenced a specific person; rather, he indicated that “I wanted career stability,” something he believed earning a special education teaching endorsement would help him achieve.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

Responses to targeted areas of inquiry are summarized below, relating to academic preparedness, psycho-social factors, and meeting basic needs. Emerging themes related to each of the three major areas follow each section.

**Academic preparedness.** The fact that foster children and alumni, as a whole, have lower rates of academic attainment, high school graduation, and college attendance has been well documented (e.g., Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008; Wolanin, 2005). Therefore, one area of inquiry in the present study was the participants’ academic readiness for college, including their experiences with early education, their performance on entrance tests, and their subsequent college grade point averages (GPA).

Contrary to the grim statistics on high school graduation rates for foster alumni as a whole, all 10 of the participants in the study had earned a high school diploma or a GED; the two participants who had earned a GED were connected with the juvenile justice system, which appeared to be a contributing factor in both cases. In spite of
earning high school completions, none of the participants placed in college-level mathematics upon entry, and only three of the 10 participants placed in college-level English. Although this participant group’s need for remediation was somewhat greater than average, the areas of remediation echoed the typical pattern, since 48% of recent high school graduates enrolling in Washington State two-year colleges need remediation in math upon entry while only 18% need remediation in writing (Stephens, 2009). Table 2 provides an overview of the educational experiences of these participants.

Table 2

**Overview of Educational Characteristics (10 total participants)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.E.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-level Math</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-level English</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptions in enrollment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A review of participant transcripts showed that grade point averages among the participants ranged from 1.77 to 4.0, with a mean of 2.92. Grades were higher overall at the technical college (mean of 3.41) compared to the community college (2.59), but the difference is unlikely to be significant given the small sample size in the study and the difference in type of institution. For example, it could be that the community college students took more rigorous courses.

In sum, the study participants showed a relatively high need for remediation upon college entry, but their rates of high school graduation were high and their college grades were good. Although broad generalizations cannot be drawn from such a small sample, it appears possible that foster alumni who do enter college, having self-selected for higher education, may not differ much from other first generation students in relation to academic skills. As Danielle Dressel, a foster alumna and peer mentor with Pierce County Alliance stated, “Foster youth don’t like being called high risk” (personal
communication, May 13, 2011). Her statement underscores the need to evaluate each student’s abilities individually while being prepared to offer assistance if needed.

**Emerging theme: Early promise.** Nearly all participants reported having performed at average to above rates during grade school. Even the one participant, Daniel, who admitted that his “grades were horrible” in grade school also indicated that he had been identified for a gifted program at one of his schools. The majority of participants in this study appeared to have indications of “early promise” for academic achievement. As Brian stated, “In elementary I was an A plus student…I was the smart kid,” and Kendra reported, “I did good in elementary school for sure.” None of the participants reported having been placed in special education for academic reasons, but one student, Anthony, did report being placed there for behavioral reasons, which had a significant impact on his progress: “All my academics were fifth grade level when I was in second grade, until they transferred me over [to special education]. And then my academics retained about a third grade level all the way through grade school.” Several of the participants mentioned changing schools frequently; Daniel reported moving “at least once a year” while in foster care. But it was interesting to note that two of the participants reported that the frequent moves occurred while they were still living with their families of origin.

Since the literature review indicated that foster children, as a whole, struggle academically, are more likely to be placed in special education, and are less likely to graduate from high school, I thought it was especially important to include this information on early success in school as it challenges existing stereotypes about foster alumni. Two primary considerations stem from the observation of “early promise” in this group of former foster children, one related to their K-12 experiences and one related to college services. During the K-12 years, stabilizing foster care placements would, in turn, decrease school mobility, with its corresponding impacts. Greater stability in school placement would also increase the likelihood that teachers would have time to recognize and nurture these students’ abilities. For instance, programs specifically designed to encourage and support college aspirations for at-risk middle school students, such as
GEAR UP (Gaining Early Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) and HERO (Higher Education Readiness Opportunity) are likely to be especially helpful to foster children (College Success Foundation, n.d.; Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2011). In the college setting, academic support services such as tutoring, which is typically available to all students, may be sufficient to help foster alumni students overcome any academic barriers they may have upon entry.

**Psycho-social factors.** A number of sources (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2005; McMillen et al., 2005) have indicated that foster alumni have a higher than average rate of psychological disorders. Therefore, participants were asked whether such issues had been a problem for them. Including the two participants who acknowledged feeling “sad” at times, six participants reported having some level of depression. However, only one reported having a formal diagnosis of depression; the majority seemed to view depression as a natural outcome of their situations. As Anthony stated, “Depression is an interesting thing. We like to label it a disorder, but in some instances it’s actually…experiencing depression through a bad situation is natural.” Similarly, Andrea said, “How could you not [be depressed], especially with all these things going on in your life?” In regard to other disorders, one participant had been diagnosed with anxiety while another had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Two reported active use of marijuana; however, none reported excessive drinking. In sum, only one of the participants reported having no psychological concerns at all, while the majority reported some level of depression or sadness, but only one was seeking treatment. Most downplayed any psychological concerns and did not cite any concrete difficulties because of them.

**Emerging theme: Educational motivation.** Participants were asked who was most influential in their decision to attend college. Most expressed self-motivation in various forms, with four of the participants citing what could be called negative motivation, or a desire to avoid a negative outcome as opposed to having a positive vision. Thus, four of the students made statements such as this recollection from Kendra: “My family would always say stuff like…’Keep your head in books. Go to school.
Don’t end up like us.” Similarly, in reference to her adoptive mother, Marissa reported that, “She gave me motivation to [go to college], I guess. But not inspiration…that’s just what motivated me to go to school, because she said that I wasn’t going to be anything.” These students seemed motivated to move away from a negative situation but did not necessarily have a clear idea of where college would lead them. Three participants made clear references to “myself” as the main motivation, with Daniel noting that “academics has always been my strong point my whole life.” Two students indicated that their foster families had encouraged them to attend college.

**Emerging theme: Resilience.** In spite of any psychological concerns, the majority of participants in this study demonstrated qualities consistent with the notion of “resilience.” Resilience is “a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma” (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). This “positive adaptation” could certainly be confirmed by the fact that the participants had enrolled in college and were meeting their basic needs while fulfilling their roles as full-time students. Additionally, participants were asked directly: “Please tell me about your strengths.” Although responses varied widely, four of the students used adjectives such as “persistent,” “determined,” and “resilient” when asked to describe their strengths, and three used descriptors such as “strong academic skills” or “smart.”

When staff participants were asked the same question about the students, responses again were variable, but the two most common descriptors were “independent” and “resilient” or “persistent.” These descriptors may signify some level of what has been called “vigilant self-reliance” (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1198). Similarly, one staff member observed that the participants were typically “mature beyond their age,” an observation that matches with findings from a study by Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt (2005), in which a majority of participants reported feeling “older and somewhat out of sync with peers” (p. 385).

In general, the participants seemed to demonstrate an internal locus of control, a term defined through early work by Rotter (1966), in which he theorized that “If the
person perceives that the event is contingent upon his own behavior or his own relatively permanent characteristics, we have termed this a belief in *internal control*” (p. 1). During member checks, a staff member confirmed the observation of internal locus of control, noting that “If they don’t [have an internal locus of control], I won’t see them.” It should be noted that Wiehe (1987) found that females in foster care were more likely to develop an external locus of control compared to their peers. In contrast, despite significant challenges during their childhoods, the young adults in this study demonstrated high degrees of self-determination. However, the participants in this study represent foster alumni who have successfully enrolled in college, so the attributes they demonstrate may not be typical of all foster alumni. Evaluation of locus of control and other factors contributing to resilience may be beneficial for all foster children well in advance of exit from care. Assessment of locus of control could be beneficial both in terms of immediate practice and future research.

**Basic needs.** Comparing the ability of this participant group to be self-supporting to the general literature on foster alumni is difficult, since most previous studies have focused on alumni in general without regard to their student status. Both the participants and other young people who are full-time students would fit with the category of “youth” (Klein, 1992, p. 133) or “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469), in which full adult responsibilities are delayed and full self-support therefore may not be expected.

Participants reported that they were meeting their basic needs while in college in a variety of ways. Three of the students reported working part-time through on campus Federal Work-Study (FWS), while three others reported working part-time jobs off campus. Two students, Marissa and Lauren, reported having boyfriends or husbands who worked, which provided financial support to the household. Four students were receiving food stamps. However, one of the students on FWS, Anthony, reported having a specific problem with qualifying for food stamps: “They’ll only give me up to 19 [hours], which is ironically one hour short of what I’d need to get food stamps, which is an extra $200 per month.”
On another measure related to self (and family) support—early parenthood—this group of participants reported a lower rate than expected based on the literature. While foster alumni overall have higher than average rates of early parenthood (e.g., Boonstra, 2011), only one participant in this study had a child living with her and her spouse. Another participant reported having given two children up in open adoption situations, which allowed him to continue to have contact with the children: “I want a better life for my children…the life that they deserve to live.”

Health care was a concern for a number of participants, as only half had medical insurance of any kind. With the exception of one student who had been able to arrange coverage through her biological father’s employer, those who did have insurance were covered through public assistance programs. Lack of health insurance stands as a potential barrier to college completion, as four of the students, one of whom did not have insurance, reported having chronic health problems such as diabetes and lupus. About half of children in foster care have chronic medical problems (Casey Family Programs, 2010a).

Living situations varied widely among the participants. Four students reported having their own apartments, and one student reported living in transitional housing, a “clean and sober” house. Two participants had returned to live with biological relatives in what they described as far less than ideal circumstances. Kendra, who was living with her aunt in a crowded household, stated that “A home is supposed to be people who support you, care about you, stuff like that; not bring you down and try to use you.” Jasmine, the only participant actively linked to a Foster Care to 21 program (Burley & Lee, 2010), was living in an apartment-like arrangement in her foster mother’s house. The relatively low rate of young adults in this study who were living with relatives is echoed in the literature on foster alumni. Dworsky and Courtney (2009) found that only about one third of foster alumni age 18-24 were living with parents or other relatives, compared to up to two-thirds of the general population in the same age group.

While current living situations were stable for most participants, six had experienced periods of homelessness in the past, ranging from “couch surfing” (staying
with friends on a temporary basis; e.g., Perez & Romo, 2011, p. 239) to living on the street or in a shelter (“Homeless Assistance,” 2010, §11301). The two who reported more extreme situations of homelessness were both males, one of whom reported sleeping in a car and in his brother’s garage, while the other had lived in “a little shack that I built, in the middle of nowhere.” For the remaining four, homelessness meant instability and having to rely upon friends or relatives. Kendra in particular reported having continued stress in relation to housing instability, and at one point had withdrawn from school because of it:

It’s been like that since I was 16…so I stopped worrying about school and started worrying about a place to stay. And that’s how I ended up messing up all over again. Messing up again and…you know, you can’t focus; you’re like ‘I’ve got to find a place to stay’…school was just like the last thing on my mind.

The rate of experience with homelessness in this participant group (60%) was higher than the rate of 20-22% reported in larger-scale studies (e.g., Casey Family Programs, 2010a; White et al., 2009). During member checks, one staff member reported that housing was a “huge” issue for foster alumni students, that finding housing that was both safe and affordable in an urban area was challenging, and lacking a family member with an established credit history who could co-sign a lease was often a barrier. Table 3 summarizes the participants’ self-reports in relation to homelessness, contact with families of origin, and other factors that potentially impact both psycho-social adjustment and the ability to meet basic needs.
Table 3

*Overview of Social Characteristics (10 total participants)*

<table>
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<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Major health problems*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced homelessness</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In contact with parents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In contact with siblings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*e.g., diabetes, epilepsy requiring ongoing medical treatment*

The large majority of students cited financial aid programs as an important source of support while in college, both to cover expenses directly related to college as well as to supplement living expenses. Seven of the eight participants were receiving various forms of aid, including aid that is specifically targeted to foster alumni: Passport to College, the Governor’s Scholarship, and the federally-funded Education Training Voucher (ETV).

The one student who was not currently receiving any form of aid, Andrea, indicated that she had been on probation for financial aid and had then dropped out of school; she had re-enrolled and was working to re-establish her eligibility. Andrea indicated “I had just enough ETV money left over to pay for my tuition,” and she was working two part-time jobs in order to cover additional expenses. None of the other students reported paying out of pocket for education-related costs. During the process of member checks, I learned that Andrea’s eligibility for financial aid had been reinstated.

In the area of support for basic needs, therefore, foster alumni who participated in this study appear to have needs that are distinct from other first-generation students, particularly in relation to housing. Six of the 10 participants had experienced periods of homelessness since leaving foster care. While all but one reported having sufficient
grants to cover college tuition and basic expenses, all could be considered low income, and five of the students did not have health insurance.

**Community college services for foster alumni.** Community and technical colleges that receive incentive funds through the Passport to College Program are required to agree to a “viable plan” consisting of the following elements: (a) a designated staff person to direct foster alumni to campus services, (b) an agreement to review student budgets on a case-by-case basis, to include helping students avoid overreliance on loans, (c) an institutional commitment to foster alumni support at the leadership level, and (d) connections with community support, including independent living providers (Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009, page 13). The two sites included in this study exceeded these minimum requirements. The urban community college initially had two full-time staff members, and continues now with one; some services for foster alumni are also provided through the college’s TRIO program, including additional tutoring and counseling support. The technical college has an advisor who carries general advising duties in addition to his work with foster alumni yet has built an active foster youth club; the technical college also has the active involvement of a second staff member in the financial aid office. These examples can serve as potential models for other higher education institutions.

**Emerging theme: Mentors.** Formal mentoring is widely used as a strategy for alumni who do not have naturally-occurring support from parents or guardians. The Foster Care Independence Act cited “emotional support and assured connections to caring adults for older youth in foster care” as an example of a core service (United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., ¶ 1). Some sources note that the effectiveness of mentoring programs is largely anecdotal and has not been well established (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005), while others assert that a mentoring relationship is “the single most important contributor to resiliency in alumni” (Shirk & Stangler, 2004, p. 10). In determining the role of mentoring in community college settings, it may be useful to consider that while foster alumni often build informal support networks, these individuals may not possess “college capital,” defined by Corwin (2008)
as “the information, skills, and social support necessary to becoming ready for and persisting in postsecondary education” (p. 46-47). The “bridging” relationships described by Corwin (2008), in which foster alumni are connected with individuals who can help in practical ways with college access, may be most useful; “bonding” relationships, which are more emotionally charged, are not always necessary (p. 172).

Member checks reinforced the varied perceptions of mentors gathered in initial interviews, with some participants reporting positive, continuing relationships with mentors, while another participant indicated that he would only want a mentor if it were someone who really understood what he had been through, not someone “who had always had it easy.” In sum, it appears that offering—but not requiring—mentor relationships would be a good strategy for colleges. Training should be provided such that mentors are sensitive to foster alumni and their backgrounds (including a sensitivity not to press for emotional bonding unless it is welcome), and are knowledgeable enough to provide practical help with college enrollment and success, the latter being the core of a successful “bridging” relationship.

Limitations of Study

This study has limitations in generalizability inherent to qualitative research. For instance, this study focused on a relatively small number of foster alumni from two specific institutions. More specifically, participants and college locations in Washington State were utilized; therefore, it is possible that foster alumni in other regions of the country have significantly differing experiences in college, particularly due to the variance in funding for youth who have “aged out” of care from state to state.

Considerations for Practice

Proceeding from the study findings and emerging themes as well as the related literature, the following factors may be considered when designing services for foster alumni. Within the context of their individual campuses, missions, and budgets, colleges seeking to serve foster alumni may wish to examine the following service elements for appropriateness and feasibility: (a) providing staff who understand foster alumni and are designated to serve them, either full-time or as part of other duties, depending upon the
size of the college; (b) recommending tutoring services to foster alumni who enter at the pre-college level; (c) increasing partnerships with K-12 institutions to the extent possible so that more foster children who show “early promise” ultimately enroll in college. This option could include early enrollment programs such as Running Start, a program in Washington State to allow students to simultaneously earn high school and college credit; (d) providing on-campus counseling, or at least a referral network for mental health services; (e) making mentors available to foster alumni, if at all possible, but having a mentor should not be mandatory; (f) offering priority registration and financial aid processing (e.g., Ambroz, 2011) for foster alumni, since gaps in enrollment or funding are particularly problematic given their lack of a safety net; (g) providing orientations not only to financial aid but on general budgeting and money management; and (h) establishing strong partnerships with community agencies to facilitate affordable housing referrals, since community colleges typically lack dormitories. Colleges may also wish to facilitate comprehensive support in other areas, such as food and medical resources, through these community partnerships, since basic living support must be in place in order for students to persist and succeed in college.

Suggestions for Future Research

The majority of young people interviewed as part of this study cited career goals that would require four year degrees or graduate study. Longitudinal studies that examine foster alumni’s success in transferring from the community college system into bachelor and master degree level programs would be valuable. Similarly, longitudinal research that addresses the pipeline between K-12 education through community college or university level study would be informative. Large-scale statewide or nationwide studies of foster alumni and their experiences at all college levels would add to the body of knowledge on young adults who have exited care. Finally, additional research on the emerging themes identified in this study (e.g., resilience; mentoring) would bring further understanding to the experiences and needs of foster alumni in a variety of contexts.
References


Chapter 4

Manuscript #3
Supporting Independence: Foster Alumni Services in the Community and Technical Colleges

by

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Chapter 4
Supporting Independence: Foster Alumni Services in the Community and Technical Colleges

Foster alumni, defined as young people who “age out” of foster care (i.e., emancipate without being reunited with their biological families, nor adopted), typically have particular disadvantages upon entering adulthood. One factor that may aid in the transition to adulthood—higher education—is being addressed through enhanced services and supportive legislation for these youth in many states. This report summarizes the results of a collective case study of foster alumni in two Washington State community and technical colleges and provides recommendations for college services based upon the study findings and supporting literature.

Reducing societal stratification and furthering social justice has long been a part of the community college mission (e.g., Brubacher & Rudy, 1976). While colleges have provided services for first-generation students through TRIO programs for years (Higher Education Act of 1965/1998), there is evidence that foster alumni have particular needs that differ from, and extend beyond, those of other first-generation students. They have experienced separation from their families during their formative years, and, in addition, have been required to establish independence earlier than most other young adults. According to one Casey Family Programs report, “Many arrive at college in a survival mode” (2010b, p. 9). Therefore, the challenge to community and technical colleges is to recognize the unique needs of foster alumni and provide appropriate services which support their emerging independence.

**Foster Alumni and College Readiness**

Each year, about 550 foster youth transition out of care in Washington State (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2010), with approximately 20,000 to 24,000 emancipating from the system each year nationwide (Nancy, 2008; Vacca, 2008). Previous research has served to document the challenges faced by this group of young people as they transition to adulthood. Among these challenges is their underrepresentation in higher education. While 59% of first generation students and 93%
of students from families in which at least one parent had a bachelor’s degree attend college (Choy, 2001), the rate of college enrollment for foster alumni has been estimated at between seven and 13% (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Since “nearly 100,000 additional foster youth in the 18 to 25-year-old age group would be attending higher education” (Wolanin, 2005, p. v) if foster alumni attended college at the same rate as their peers, the challenge and the opportunity for the colleges is clear. Community and technical colleges have a particular role to play in helping to address these challenges, since foster alumni are most likely to access higher education through their doors (e.g., Herlocker, 2006).

**Academics**

The lower rates of academic achievement for foster children and alumni in general have been the focus of a significant amount of research. They are more likely to be held back a grade (Scherr, 2007; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004); their performance on standardized testing tends to be lower (Burley & Halpern, 2001; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008); and they are more likely to be placed in special education classes at a rate two and a half to five times higher than the general population (Geenen & Powers, 2006; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2008; Zetlin, 2006). Special education status serves as a predictor for dropping out of high school (Lehr, 2004). Indeed, estimates of high school completion rates for those in foster care fall between 50% and 64% (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003; Wolanin, 2005), in comparison to a rate of 75% for the general population (Chapman, Laird, & Kewalramani, 2010). As one possible explanation for foster children’s lower school achievement, greater school mobility (i.e., frequent changes in schools) has been suggested (e.g., Pecora et al., 2006), but the underlying reasons are certain to be complex.

**Psycho-Social Factors**

There is a significant body of research demonstrating that foster children and alumni, overall, experience mental health concerns at a higher rate than the general population (Casey Family Programs, 2005; ChildTrends, 2003; Goerge et al., 1992;
White et al., 2009). The three conditions most likely to persist into adulthood are depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Casey Family Programs, 2005).

Interpersonal support and personal resilience are two potential factors which may help offset mental health concerns. During foster care placement, children may or may not be placed with families that share their background, as foster children are more likely to be members of minority groups (Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Thayer, 2000). Continued connections with family, therefore, can play an important role for some young people, and siblings are one of the most likely sources of continued biological relationships (Corwin, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In regard to personal characteristics, some foster alumni also demonstrate “vigilant self-reliance (Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1198) and “resilience…a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma” (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). In fact, according to one study, a majority (67%) demonstrated high levels of resilience (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

Basic Needs

Some theorists have labeled the period between about age 18 and age 25 as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469), since full independence is not yet expected. The designation as an “emerging adult” would appear to be especially fitting for full-time students. It is not unusual for young adults to continue to receive support from their families of origin; they receive on average about $38,000 from their parents through age 34 (Fernandes, 2007), and half to two-thirds live with a parent or another relative (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009). In the case of foster alumni, in contrast, only about one-third report living with a family member or relative (Dworsky & Courtney, 2009); it must be noted that these would be the same families from which they were removed, and they are therefore less likely to represent a stable living situation.

The risk of homelessness experienced by foster alumni may be linked to these lower levels of family support. Approximately 20% of foster alumni reported having been homeless for at least one day during their first year out of foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2010a; White et al., 2009). Across studies, definitions of homelessness ranged
from “couch surfing” (Perez & Romo, 2011, p. 239) to living in a shelter or on the streets. In addition, foster alumni are at risk for moving from the support of the foster care system to another public system of support, as their rates of incarceration and receipt of public assistance is higher than average (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Dworsky, 2005). On the whole, foster alumni are more likely to struggle with earning enough to be self sufficient (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Mason et al., 2003). While college is certainly a step toward greater earnings and self-sufficiency, the struggles with self support outlined above serve as potential barriers to foster alumni as they consider the viability of full-time college attendance.

Community College Services for Foster Alumni

As far back as 1964, federal TRIO programs were established to serve first-generation college students (United States Department of Education, 2009). More recently, TRIO mandates have been updated to reflect the need to serve foster alumni (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Following changes in the Social Security Act, a number of states have also extended foster care up to age 21 for youth who meet certain criteria, typically involving continued enrollment in secondary or post-secondary education (Courtney, Dworsky, & Peters, 2009). Washington State, the focus of the present study, is among the states extend foster care for youth who are enrolled in continued education; however, at present only 50 youth per year may receive extensions (Burley & Lee, 2010), a number that represents just under 10% of youth exiting care on an annual basis (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2010).

For foster alumni who do attend college, targeted scholarships are available. These include the Education Training Voucher (ETV) program, a federal program administered by the states that provides up to $5,000 per year (Davis & Losey, 2008). Scholarships that are unique to Washington State are the Passport to College scholarship and the Governor’s Scholarship (College Success Foundation, 2008; Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board [HECB], 2009).

Overall, services for college-bound foster alumni fall into three categories: basic living assistance, such as the Foster Care to 21 extensions; scholarship programs,
including Passport to College; and student services for foster alumni, such as advocacy
groups or clubs. While the first two categories—basic living support and scholarships—
typically follow statewide guidelines, targeted student services for foster alumni fall
under the discretion of each college and therefore vary considerably from one campus to
another within the state. Services vary even more substantially from state to state, due to
differences in policies and laws relating to foster children as they exit care.

**Recommendations for Practice from the Literature**

Dworsky and Perez (2010) conducted an exploratory study to examine campus
support programs at universities in California and Washington. The two Washington
State participants were Seattle University and the College Success Foundation, a non-
profit organization serving foster children and alumni as well as at-risk and first-
generation students. Although their focus was on four-year colleges, their findings on
college services echoed those of the present study: A mixture of direct service provision
and referrals, including those for mental health services; a relatively small number of
staff, and concerns about financial sustainability of the program; efforts at outreach to
foster alumni on campus; and collaborative partnerships with community organizations.
The study also highlighted the challenges involved in identifying and recruiting eligible
students, an issue cited by both sites that participated in the present study.

One distinct difference in campus services outlined by Dworsky and Perez (2010)
was the availability of dormitories at the universities that participated in the study: “Most
campus support programs provide year-round housing. This is critical for former foster
youth, because many have nowhere to go when school is not in session” (p. 259). This
statement highlights the importance of addressing the housing needs of foster alumni in
community and technical college, which rarely offer campus housing.

Two important sources of information related to recommendations for foster
alumni services in college settings are the Washington Higher Education Coordinating
Board (HECB), which administers the Passport to College scholarship program; and
Casey Family Programs, which operated nationally as an advocacy and charitable
organization for foster alumni, although their focus tends to be four-year colleges and universities.

Community and technical colleges that receive incentive funds through the Passport to College Program are required to agree to a “viable plan” consisting of the following elements: (a) a designated staff person to direct foster alumni to campus services, (b) an agreement to review student budgets on a case-by-case basis, to include helping students avoid overreliance on loans, (c) an institutional commitment to foster alumni support at the leadership level, and (d) connections with community support, including independent living providers (Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board [HECB], 2009, page 13).

Similarly, Casey Family Programs (2010b) has identified six “Core Elements” of service: (a) designated leadership, (b) internal and external champions, (c) collaborations with community agencies, (d) data-driven decision making, (e) staff peer support and professional development, and (f) sustainability planning.

The Casey Family (2010b) recommendations focus on four-year college settings. The “viable plan” outlined by the HECB (2009) can apply equally to two-year and four-year colleges, since students are able to use the Passport to College scholarship in either setting. Elements that are common to both of these sources are an institutional commitment to service demonstrated at the leadership level and collaborations with community partners. Implicit to the notion of institutional commitment would be staff dedicated to serving the needs of foster alumni, although that is not specifically stated in the Casey Family recommendations.

The Study: Methods and Findings

As noted above, general guidelines on foster alumni services have been produced by several sources. However, the focus of previous studies has been on four-year college settings. The present study, building upon the results of interviews and other data collection using a collective case study method, identifies areas of service that may be considered specifically by community and technical colleges as they seek to enhance support for foster alumni within the context of their own campuses.
Critical Social Science

The theoretical perspective guiding this study was critical social science, also called critical theory. Critical social science is a useful lens through which to view situations where fundamental inequalities in power, including status and resources, exist (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011), as is the case with foster youth. The term “social justice” is also used to describe an approach to research that includes an emotional or political affiliation with participants as well as a goal of advocacy, not just collection of data (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 475). Therefore, using a critical social science perspective, my primary goal was to provide information that would be useful to foster alumni themselves and to those who advocate for them. My secondary goal was to add to the body of knowledge in the field and inform practice, which in turn could lead to more focused and effective services, furthering the goal of social justice for a population of students which has particular disadvantages and service needs.

Site Selection and Participants

Two colleges located in Washington State served as participant sites in the present study. Using a mix of purposeful sampling, also called “purposive sampling” by some researchers (e.g., Patten, 2009, p. 51), and convenience sampling (Merriam, 1998), I chose one community college and one technical college as sites. Both community and technical colleges are part of the two-year public college system in Washington State.

Foster alumni students who were between the ages of 18-26 were invited to participate in the study. This age group was chosen to be consistent with recent legislation creating scholarship benefits for emancipated foster alumni; it also allowed me to focus on students who fit the category of young adults rather than non-traditional students. However, one 29 year old student was included in the study due to the particular experience he was able to share, one that related to his transition into and out of foster care rather than to his current age. Staff participants were those who had direct involvement with foster alumni services on their campuses.
Collective Case Study

This study used the collective case study method: I collected data from a total of 14 participants at the two sites, using an interview protocol and review of relevant case records. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; both individual case and cross-case analysis was performed, and findings were evaluated in relation to the literature.

To increase internal validity and trustworthiness of the study’s findings, I employed three customary methods (e.g., Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Shkedi, 2005). The first method consisted of triangulation of data; consistent with the collective case study method, multiple sources of information were gathered, and multiple interviews were conducted. Further, the staff interviews served as triangulation of student self-reports, and the written data (such as entrance scores) served as triangulation of information on key points. A second method focused on member checks; findings were discussed with a total of six participants (three students and three staff members). A third method, which overlaps to some extent with both triangulation and member checks, involved “peer examination” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). The staff participant reviews served both as triangulation and as a form of peer examination.

Cross-Case Analysis

The guiding question for this study was “What are the experiences of foster alumni in the community colleges?” Focused areas of inquiry were identified based upon a review of the literature: (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social factors, and (c) meeting basic needs, particularly housing. A fourth area of inquiry focused on both student and staff experiences with foster alumni services at the two sites. The focus of this report is considerations for college services in relation to study findings; individual participant case summaries have been provided in a separate report.

To aid in cross-case analysis, I employed a method recommended by Ruona (2005), in which functions of Microsoft Word are used in lieu of specialized qualitative analysis software. The transcript documents were formatted into tables; responses were coded and then grouped using the “sort” function. I also created an Excel spreadsheet
which compiled student data on key point. See Table 1, which provides some demographic information on the participants.

Table 1

*Overview of Participant Demographics (10 total participants)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>21.2 years</td>
<td>18-29 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of entry to foster care</td>
<td>8.7 years</td>
<td>birth-15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial minority</td>
<td>5 (total)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Considerations for Practice: Findings and Theory**

The following section examines existing and potential college services in relation to the findings of the present study and the existing literature. The present study provides a unique opportunity to consider the experiences of students who have self-selected for community and technical college enrollment. Information gathered from staff who work directly with foster alumni at the two study sites is also highly relevant to considerations for practice.

**Overview of Participant Sites**

Two colleges within the Washington State community and technical college system served as study participants. Site One was a technical college in a suburban area. Two staff members provided the majority of foster alumni services along with their other job duties, one in financial aid and one in advising. The technical college reported serving approximately 27 self-identified foster alumni per year.

Site Two was a community college located in an urban area. At the time initial interviews were conducted, the college had two full-time staff members dedicated to foster alumni services. They reported having just over 200 students who self-identified through the enrollment process as having been in the foster care system, with 36 of those students actively involved with the college’s foster alumni support. A follow up six
months after the initial interview showed that one staff member had left and was not being replaced due to budget constraints. The remaining staff member reported that this reduction would necessitate more of a “concierge” approach, focusing on facilitating services and providing referrals, rather than the comprehensive approach to direct services they had previously been able to provide.

**Staffing Patterns**

Consideration: Providing staff who understand foster alumni and are designated to serve them, either full-time or as part of other duties, depending upon the size of the college.

The two study sites demonstrated very different staffing patterns, but both seemed to be effective: the larger site had two full-time designated staff when the study began, while the smaller site had two staff members, one in advising and one in financial aid, contributing the foster alumni support in different ways. As one of the staff members at Site One stated: “I think that one of the biggest things is having people on campus in a number of departments that care and that are on the same page as far as the work that you want to do with foster youth.” A staff member from Site Two referred to the foster alumni support as a “safety net,” noting that “I think, more than anything else, they don’t distrust everybody like they did when they first came. They understand there really are people out there that care how successful they are and how they’re doing.”

The students interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the support services they were receiving. When asked what advice they would give in regard to college foster alumni programs, they primarily mentioned greater outreach to eligible students to ensure that everyone who was eligible knew about the service. As one student said, “You just need somebody who’s there to answer all your questions, who can guide you…it’s pretty awesome.” Another student reported that “If it wasn’t for the (name of program), I would not have known anything about the (local independent housing provider), and I would not have gone to get their assistance with the housing. So if I didn’t know anything about the (housing provider), I probably would have dropped out again.”
The need for designated staff is recognized most directly by the HECB, item (a). In fact, the HECB maintains a website—the Passport to College Contact Directory—which allows identification of foster alumni points of contact at all public, and some private, colleges in Washington State.

Examining college services for foster alumni through the lens of critical social science, it must be noted that the longstanding TRIO support services for first-generation students have been utilized as a means to provide services for foster alumni at some colleges. Language has since been added to TRIO program mandates to include foster alumni (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Site Two in the present study was able to collaborate extensively with TRIO; however, Site One did not have a TRIO program. Therefore, reliance upon existing first-generation support is not sufficient to meet the needs of foster alumni in all colleges. Even in colleges where TRIO programs exist, foster alumni have specific needs that differ from and/or extend beyond those of other first generations students (e.g., housing, as outlined below). Providing the “safety net” mentioned above in the form of dedicated staff—whether the staff are dedicated full-time to foster alumni or perform the duties as part of a broader job description—would appear worthy of consideration within the mission of the two year colleges.

**Priority Registration and Financial Aid Processing**

Consideration: Offering priority registration and financial aid processing for foster alumni, since gaps in enrollment or funding are particularly problematic given their lack of a safety net.

Site One had just implemented priority registration for foster alumni. Follow up contact showed that the college was continuing to offer foster alumni the option to register one week ahead of time, but had not been tracking the number of students who were using the option. Site Two was utilizing priority financial aid processing at the time of the initial interview. However, follow up with the site showed that they had decided not to continue that process when financial aid funding levels at the college were reduced. Instead, it was incumbent upon the foster alumni support staff to remind students to apply for aid in a timely manner.
Since the number of foster alumni at most colleges is relatively small when measured against the whole student body, the potential benefit of priority registration and/or financial aid processing seems great while the impact on other students would remain relatively small. Considering that three of the 10 students in the study had experienced gaps in enrollment, this simple means of reducing the likelihood of an enrollment gap appears worthy of examination.

David Ambroz, an advocate for foster alumni in California and Executive Director of the Los Angeles City College Foundation, stated the following in relation to a proposed bill to allow early enrollment in college for foster alumni (2011, ¶ 6):

Foster youth are our children. The state has pulled them legitimately from their homes and invests in them for years -- only to see that investment go nowhere after they emancipate. AB 12 Fostering Connections, combined with a policy supporting Early (Priority) Enrollment, will yield a much higher economic and moral return for the investment California makes in its most vulnerable. The assertion that foster youth are “our children” goes to the heart of the critical theory perspective on this issue. And to illustrate the practicality of his suggestion, the title of the article says “Free-ish Solutions,” alluding to the fact that colleges may be able to implement priority registration without incurring additional costs, certainly an attractive option in today’s budget climate.

**Money Management Training**

Consideration: Providing orientations not only to financial aid but on general budgeting and money management.

During initial interviews and member checks at both college sites, budgeting and money management workshops were mentioned. The staff reported the need to help students who have funds disbursed at the beginning of each quarter make the money last long enough. While the majority of the student participants seemed to view themselves as good money managers, the staff has the opportunity to work with a wider variety of students and therefore recommended money management training in relation to a perceived need. This consideration for service matches with item (b) from the HECB’s viable plan elements, reviewing student budgets on a case-by-case basis to include helping students avoid overreliance on loans.
As an example of service, a staff participant at one site reported:

We just completed a budget [workshop], I called it “Money 101,” like a three-week workshop on how to handle money, how to budget, how to save, how to pay off debt, things like that, how to stay out of debt. So, students, they can come and be a part of that.

In contrast to many other first-generation students, foster alumni typically do not have extensive family support networks. Only three of the 10 participants were in contact with biological parents (see Table 3 to follow), and only one of the participants was receiving support through a Foster Care to 21 program. Without the ability to rely on family support, being able to maximize one’s own funds and to identify additional sources of funding when needed is of great importance.

In a capitalist society, money is one of the most clear representations of power. Therefore, helping foster alumni—who by definition do not have family support—to manage their money well would seem to be a very direct form of empowerment.

**Academic Support**

Consideration: Recommending tutoring services to foster alumni who enter at the pre-college level.

In the present study, all of the 10 student participants needed Math remediation while 7 needed remediation in English. Therefore, as part of campus foster alumni services, making foster alumni aware of academic support such as tutoring seems to be well worth considering. One student participant talked about having failed a math class, noting “this quarter I plan to utilize the tutoring center… So I can go back home or whatever, but first I can do my homework…I’m just going to do it at school.”

Participant grade point averages (GPA) ranged from 1.77 to 4.0, with a mean of 2.92. One of the staff participants noted that “In many cases, the concern is helping them maintain the 2.0 average [required to qualify for financial aid] so that they can be retained.” This staff member also expressed concern that spending too much time in remedial courses could jeopardize the students’ momentum toward graduation. Table 2 provides an overview of the educational experiences of the study participants.
Table 2

*Overview of Educational Characteristics (10 total participants)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.E.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-level Math</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College-level English</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptions in enrollment</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not uncommon for students in general to need skill remediation before they can enroll in college-level work: 48% of recent high school graduates enrolling in Washington State two-year colleges need remediation in math upon entry and 18% need remediation in writing (Stephens, 2009). However, a review of the literature clearly indicates that foster alumni are more likely to struggle in relation to academic performance. In sum, their high school graduation rates are lower than average (e.g., Wolanin, 2005); they are more likely to have been placed in special education classes (e.g., Zetlin, 2006); and they are more likely to have shown poor academic performance while in the K-12 system, including higher rates of grade retention (e.g., Scherr, 2007).

In relation to critical theory, foster alumni and any other students that enter with skill deficits begin their college experience from a position of disempowerment. One significant way to help them overcome barriers to college success would be direct academic support. The notion that colleges should assist students with academic deficits goes right to the heart of the “equity agenda” (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Assisting adults who have exited the K-12 system yet do not demonstrate college-level skills is a function of the public colleges, and that role has fallen to two year colleges in particular.
Counseling Services

Consideration: Providing on-campus counseling, or at least a referral network for mental health services.

Six of the participants in the present study reported having some level of depression. However, only one had been formally diagnosed with depression; several made statements that indicated they found their feelings to be understandable under the circumstances rather than a sign of pathology, as when one participant said, “How could you not [be depressed], especially with all these things going on in your life?” In relation to other psychological concerns, one student had been diagnosed with anxiety while another had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Two reported active use of marijuana; however, none reported excessive drinking.

Staff members at both study sites, two of which had master’s degrees in counseling, reported providing some first-level counseling for students when necessary. However both sites referred students to community partners for counseling services, in addition to the counseling available through the TRIO student services at Site Two. In addition, both sites reported needing to find a balance in relating to students about their past. As one staff member stated, “Some of them don’t trust you at first…I don’t ask about the past. They’re here in college now and they want to be successful, and my job is to move forward and be successful, not to deal with the issues of the past.” This view was echoed in student statements such as, “I’m not going to some counseling; I’ve got problems, but everybody got problems, why would I go to counseling just because I’m in a certain group?” Thus, counseling referrals were made upon request rather than as part of an intake process.

Table 3 summarizes the participants’ self-reports in relation to homelessness, contact with families of origin, and other factors that potentially impact both psycho-social adjustment and the ability to meet basic needs.
Table 3

*Overview of Social Characteristics (10 total participants)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Legal record</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major health problems*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced homelessness</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In contact with parents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In contact with siblings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*e.g., diabetes, epilepsy requiring ongoing medical treatment

The need for availability of counseling services is grounded in the literature on foster alumni, which reports that this group as a whole experiences mental health concerns at a higher rate than average (e.g., White et al., 2009). In particular, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were found to be the most likely to persist into adulthood (Casey Family Programs, 2005). The study of campus support services by Dworsky and Perez (2010) cited mental health services as a “common need...because mental health problems or personal crises can adversely affect academic progress” (p. 259).

Through the lens of critical theory, it would appear important to make counseling or other mental health support available to young people who need it, while avoiding the temptation to pathologize or stigmatize foster alumni as a group. Therefore, the service consideration for this area of potential need emphasizes making counseling available on campus or through a referral network. Considering the related study finding that only half the participants had medical insurance, providing low-cost options for mental health services would appear to be a valuable service to those who need it and a potentially important support to their continuation in college.
Mentoring

Consideration: Making mentors available to foster alumni, if at all possible, but having a mentor should not be mandatory.

This consideration stems from an emerging theme; it was not an area of direct inquiry. However, some sources indicate that mentoring is an important service for foster children and alumni (e.g., Shirk & Stangler, 2004; United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d).

Findings in the present study related to mentoring were mixed. Two participants voiced positive experiences or feelings related to having a mentor, while another participant indicated that he would only want a mentor if it were someone who really understood what he had been through, not someone “who had always had it easy.” Staff at the larger of the two college sites, Site Two, indicated that they had offered a mentoring program, yet often volunteer mentors were underutilized. As one staff member reported:

We put together a very elaborate mentor program and we were very fortunate to get people, not just from this college to be mentors, but from [two nearby universities] to be mentors. We had regular meetings and potluck dinners and the whole thing. We couldn’t get the students to fill the slots; we got more volunteer mentors than we could get students to do it, to be the mentee.

In contrast, a staff member at Site One indicated that mentoring was not a priority for foster alumni services, noting in regard to mentors that “It’s more of an abundance that they have. Too many mentors; too many people they can turn to, and all those mentors that are in their life are at a surface level.”

Thus, considering the goal of empowerment inherent to critical theory, it seems inadvisable to force foster alumni into relationships that they do not want. They are adults themselves; while some certainly may welcome an older adult into their life in the role of mentor, certainly not all of them do, as indicated by the quotes above. Corwin (2008) addressed the situation of mentors in the course of her qualitative study situated on a four-year college campus. Corwin found that “bridging” relationships, in which foster alumni are connected with individuals who can help in practical ways with college access, may be most useful; “bonding” relationships, which are more emotionally
charged, are not always necessary (p. 172). The notion of bridging relationships corresponds to the initial consideration related to designated staff. Relationships that tend toward “bonding” could be made available; yet out of respect to the students’ status as adults, mentoring should not be required.

A promising new mentoring program, funded by the College Success Foundation (2011), is the “Passport Navigator Program.” It utilizes peer mentors; the ideal mentor would be a former foster child themselves and would have at least sophomore standing in college. Of the 11 colleges chosen to participate, only four are two-year colleges, and neither of my research sites was chosen as participants at this time. If the Navigator program proves successful in recruiting foster alumni to help other foster alumni, it would help address the participant concern noted above, that of having a mentor who really understands the situation of foster alumni.

**Community Partnerships**

Consideration: Establishing strong partnerships with community agencies to facilitate affordable housing referrals, since community colleges typically lack dormitories. Colleges may also wish to facilitate comprehensive support in other areas, such as food and medical resources, through these community partnerships, since basic living support must be in place in order for students to persist and succeed in college.

In the present study, six out of 10 participants (60%) had experienced periods of homelessness, a higher rate than predicted by the literature review. In addition, all could be considered low income: Three students were working part-time jobs off campus, three had WorkStudy positions, and all were reliant on financial aid. Only half had health insurance. All of these areas highlight the need for either direct college services (when funding is available) or strong community partnerships so that students can meet their basic needs and continue in college.

As an example, the larger urban study site (Site Two) had a strong partnership with a local agency that runs the federal Independent Living Program serving young adults age 18-23. Three of the six student participants indicated having received rent assistance in amounts up to $700. In addition, one participant reported that she had a
“case worker” through this same organization that helped with a variety of needs. Site One also had connections with both the Independent Living Program provider and two local organizations serving foster alumni, one a government agency and one a religious-based nonprofit. These examples seem to represent an optimal situation—having strong community partners who are able to provide not only logistical assistance to students in terms of identifying services but also have funds available to directly help meet student needs. In Washington State, Foster Care to 21 has been approved for only 50 students at this time (Burley & Lee, 2010), a number that represents only about 10% of foster youth exiting care each year (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2010). Therefore, leveraging support from other sources is essential.

The HECB distributes $500 per quarter for each Passport-eligible student to as an “incentive fund” to support college services to foster alumni (Valerie Robertson, personal communication, November 7, 2011). One of the research sites reported difficulty spending the funds in ways that would benefit students, as they indicated that they were precluded from using the funds for direct student support, such as purchasing a text book. Meanwhile, some funds went unused; the staff providing direct services to students did not always have signature authority for purchasing on behalf of the college, leading to delays in processing. Follow up with the college sites showed that administration of the incentive funds has been moved from the HECB to the College Success Foundation, a nonprofit organization. It seems likely that this change might facilitate processing of the funds for student support.

The need for community partnerships was cited by both the HECB and Casey Family Programs. This would appear to be a clear recognition that colleges cannot singlehandedly address all of the potential needs of foster alumni, nor should they attempt to do so. In light of recent budget challenges, the need for strong community partnerships is greater than ever. There are non-profit organizations in most communities that specialize in assisting with mental health, counseling, health care, housing, and other basic needs.
Critical theory could address both the power inherent in funding and in social capital in terms of the strength of relationships in meeting basic needs. Site Two, for instance, is able to leverage a partnership with a local non-profit organization that is receiving federal funds on behalf of youth in need who also happen to be students. This is an example of the type of partnership that can counteract previous inequalities in access to resources.

**K-12 Partnerships**

Consideration: Increasing partnerships with K-12 institutions to the extent possible so that more foster children who show “early promise” ultimately enroll in college.

This consideration follows from an emerging theme in the present study: Five of the participants reported clear examples of what could be called “early promise” during their elementary school years, (e.g., qualifying for gifted programs, reports of “all A’s,” or being an early reader). In the case of two additional students, early academic achievement was hard to evaluate because they entered the country during their grade school years. One of these students had to learn English upon arrival, whereas the other spoke English, but with such a strong accent that she was erroneously placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. However, her independence was already showing when, at the age of seven, she found a way to move out of the ESL classes: “I went to my regular classes and they would come looking for me every day and I’d be in my class. And finally they left me alone.”

The finding of early promise stands in contrast to the literature on foster children and alumni in general; namely, that they struggle with academic performance. However, what is true of the whole may not be true of individuals. In spite of indications of early promise, by the time the study participants took college entrance exams most did not perform at college level; see Table 1.

Critical theory demands that we raise the question of what happened in the interceding years. The literature review provides possible explanations for this drop in performance, such as higher than usual school mobility (e.g., Pecora et al., 2006) with its
associated loss of social capital (Pribesh & Downey, 1999). Recognizing the injustice of this situation, a lawsuit was filed in 1998 on behalf of foster children who had experienced multiple placements (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2011). The suit resulted in the formation of an oversight panel in 2004, and efforts since that time related to stabilizing placements are likely, in turn, to result in more stable school placements.

Neither of the study sites mentioned specific partnerships with the K-12 system. This consideration would apply more to the educational system as a whole. The initial Passport to College plan included educational transition planning targeted at students age 14 and up in partnership with nonprofit organizations in King and Snohomish counties (HECB, 2007). The results of the present study, while preliminary, would indicate that intervention and tracking of academically capable students should begin much earlier, in elementary school. Within the colleges themselves, Running Start, a program in Washington State to allow students to simultaneously earn high school and college credit (Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.), could be promoted to community partners that have responsibility for foster children.

**Conclusion**

This report summarized the findings of a collective case study of two community and technical college sites in Washington State in relation to considerations for practice for foster alumni services. These considerations are specific to two-year college settings, in contrast to previous research and service recommendations that have focused primarily on university settings. Continued evaluation of practice in the two year colleges is important to serving foster alumni, since community and technical colleges are the most likely entry point for this group of students (HECB, 2010; Herlocker, 2006).

**Suggestions for Future Research and Planning**

The considerations for service outlined above were drawn from interviews with students and staff at two Washington State colleges; supporting literature and recommendations for service from other organizations had a national scope. Additional research in other states, especially in states which might exemplify effective practices,
would be useful. It would be particularly helpful to identify commonalities in effective service across states that transcend differences in state laws and policies.

As a whole, more research has been conducted on foster children than foster alumni. Therefore, additional research on the general needs of foster youth as they age out of care would be beneficial. In regard to higher education, the few studies that exist have focused on foster alumni in four-year college settings. Therefore, additional research into foster alumni experiences in two-year colleges would be useful, particularly since 55-75% of foster alumni enter higher education through that route (HECB, 2010; Herlocker, 2006).

Further, research into effective practices at the colleges would be especially helpful. Since foster alumni services are still in the early stages of development, evaluation of the effectiveness of particular services would help focus services and facilitate the most effective use of resources. For example, Dworsky and Perez (2010) noted that in some cases there was “a disconnect between students’ perceived needs and the services or supports that the programs provide,” (p. 262), citing a program that was mandatory for foster youth, yet a majority did not find it helpful.

In keeping with the social justice perspective of this report, additional research and service planning that involves foster alumni as participants rather than simply recipients of service would appear to be beneficial. For instance, colleges could create advisory boards of foster alumni to assist in service development. By involving foster alumni directly, the likelihood that services are not only well intentioned but well focused would be increased.
References


Chapter 5
General Conclusion

Synopsis

The focus of this dissertation was the experiences of foster alumni in two-year, state funded colleges; students and staff from two such colleges in Washington State—one community college and one technical college—served as participants for the collective case study using a qualitative, critical social science approach. The first manuscript provided an overview of existing knowledge in relation to foster alumni and their readiness for college. The literature review informed the three areas of inquiry for the dissertation research, which focused on (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social issues, and (c) basic needs of foster alumni in community and technical colleges. In addition, the study identified themes that emerged in the course of the interviews and review of the related case study data. In addition to the literature review manuscript, two manuscripts were provided which focused on reporting the research findings: Chapter 3 provided an overview of findings, including both individual and cross-case analysis, while Chapter 4 focused on the findings of the cross-case analysis in relation to considerations for college services.

As anticipated, foster alumni share certain characteristics with first-generation college students, and may be considered a subset of that group in many ways. For instance, the participants in this study had a high need for remediation of academic skills upon entry to college. However, their needs extended beyond those of typical first-generation students, particularly in relation to housing. A majority of the participants (six of the 10) had experienced periods of homelessness, highlighting the potential dangers of gaps in enrollment that would result in loss of financial aid and related support. Unlike first-generation students, foster alumni typically do not have extended families to turn to during such times. And if they do, by definition they would be the same families from which they were removed, and would thus represent potential high-risk living situations for these young adults.

At the time of this writing, state funding for public education at all levels is facing shortfalls. In keeping with the social justice perspective of this dissertation, one of my
goals in presenting these findings is to help defend funding for foster alumni if it falls under scrutiny. And one of the best ways to defend them, I believe, is by helping to make foster alumni services more effective and by linking them to other student services. For instance, the practice of many colleges to serve foster alumni through existing TRIO or other first-generation student support modes seems reasonable, yet along with that, staff must recognize the areas in which foster alumni differ from other students and/or have needs that are similar yet more extensive. For instance, all students need housing; yet for foster alumni, losing financial aid funds may lead to homelessness whereas other students might move back in with parents. During these challenging times, colleges cannot be expected to meet all potential needs that foster alumni, or any student, may have—but this fact simply underscores the need for well-planned services and enhanced community partnerships in order to leverage all available resources.

Service Considerations

Proceeding from the study findings and emerging themes, a number of considerations can be proposed for foster alumni, their advocates, and the community college leaders who design services for them. Colleges may wish to examine the following areas of academic and student services within the context of their campus culture, seeking to leverage community partnerships whenever possible:

- Designated support staff for foster alumni
- Academic support such as tutoring for students who test below college level
- K-12 partnerships, to facilitate enrollment of students showing “early promise”
- Counseling services, including referrals for mental health treatment
- Mentoring programs (to be made available, not required)
- Priority registration and financial aid processing
- Orientations for financial aid; general budgeting workshops
- Referrals for affordable housing and other basic needs
Summary

This dissertation, presented using the manuscript format, addressed the theme of foster alumni in the community and technical colleges. Both a literature review manuscript and two manuscripts that reported on different aspects of the present study were included, all of which utilized a critical social science approach. Direct findings and emerging themes were presented, particularly in relation to (a) academic preparedness, (b) psycho-social issues, and (c) basic needs. Implications for practice in the form of service considerations were given, as well as recommendations for future research. In the appendices that follow, additional detail on study methods and further analysis of the recommendations for future research is provided.
References


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Appendix A

Methods

This collective case study incorporated two college sites and a total of 14 individual participants. This appendix provides additional information on several areas that could not be included in the primary manuscripts due to page number limitations for the target journal: Selection of topic and personal disclosure, the critical theory or social justice perspective, the collective case study approach, individual case review and analysis, and cross-case analysis. The appendix concludes with a sample worksheet for analyzing case reports.

Selection of Topic and Personal Disclosure

There were two primary reasons that I chose the topic of foster alumni in the community college, with the first reason relating more to my professional work and the second being more personal in nature. Both of these reasons led to my decision to approach the study from a critical social science or social justice perspective, since these theoretical orientations allow the researcher to acknowledge a personal bias in relation to the study and to use the research to advocate for participants.

Professional orientation. At the time I was deciding upon a dissertation topic, funding for—and and awareness of—foster alumni in the community colleges was growing. This was during a time period (2007-08) prior to the onset of the current recession and its concomitant budget constraints. In considering the situation of foster alumni, it seemed natural to me that state-funded colleges would be an avenue for transition to adulthood. Furthermore, it seemed appropriate that the community colleges would embrace that role, not only because it was consistent with their overall mission (including the “equity agenda” as described by Bailey and Morest, 2006) but also because foster alumni—having been wards of the state—seemed to be “our children” in a very practical sense. Finally, with my strong interest in student affairs work, the topic seemed to be appropriate to that avenue.

Personal orientation. Although I was not in foster care myself, I am a first-generation college student from a rural area and am the only one of the five children in
my family to earn a four-year degree or higher. Foster alumni are frequently grouped with first-generation students for purposes of providing services, yet it seemed likely to me that any assumption that their service needs were similar warranted further examination. My youngest sister joined our family at the age of two through what would now be called “kinship care,” followed by adoption. Being eight years older, I had first-hand experience helping her to adjust to the family. In addition, one of my close friends from my undergraduate years was a foster child. Thinking of their personal situations in relation to the trend for increased funding for foster alumni services in the colleges motivated me to undertake the study using an advocacy perspective.

**Social Justice (Critical Theory) Perspective**

Because of my background in social sciences, I was interested in conducting a qualitative study grounded in critical social science that sought to illustrate the participants’ points of view, allowing me to stay close to—rather than removed from—the issue under study. This approach allows a depth of understanding that, for instance, a positivist approach would not.

**Theoretical foundations.** This study was guided by a critical social science approach. Critical social science, also called “conflict theory” in sociology, can be contrasted with both positivist and interpretive approaches (Neuman, 2003; Schaefer, 2004). Although it, like positivism, relies upon a realist position or a search for an existent social reality, it seeks to question the status quo rather than to simply explain or support it. In contrast to the interpretive approach, critical social science takes a political stand in terms of supporting one view over another and is therefore not value-neutral. Yet like interpretive research, critical social science represents a qualitative approach to research, one in which depth is favored over breadth; rather than proof, understanding is the goal. Creswell (2008) defines qualitative research as:

> a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants; asks broad, general questions; collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants; describes and analyzes these words for themes; and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner (p. 46).
The term “biased” should be understood in this context as contrasting with the objective or outsider view common to the positivist approach to research. Using the critical social science paradigm, the researcher might be labeled biased in favor of the research participants, as empowerment and reduction of social stratification are stated goals. In fact, they are essential elements of the approach. As stated by Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011):

We are defining a criticalist as a researcher, teacher, or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted…Facts can never be isolated from the domain of values…Certain groups in any society and particular societies in general are privileged over others…[and] the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable (p. 164).

The critical social science approach, therefore, is a qualitative approach that stands in contrast to other approaches within the qualitative realm, in that it goes beyond describing participants’ experiences by seeking to enable a multi-faceted depth of understanding leading to social change. It is therefore not as value-neutral as an interpretive approach, nor as reductionist as a phenomenological approach. For these reasons, a critical social science approach seemed to be especially well suited to the topic of the study.

**Social justice and advocacy.** The critical social science (or conflict theory) perspective finds its roots in the work of Karl Marx. His examination of power structures, leading to terms such as “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat,” is commonly known even to those who may not entirely agree with his conclusions (Neuman, 2003; Schaefer, 2004). Critical social science, in sum, represents an attempt to make research less a tool of the elite and more a means for social change.

The desire for social change is directly relevant to examining issues of social justice and then seeking to use the information gathered through research practices to
inform advocacy. In order to fulfill the advocacy goal of my work, I have taken several specific actions related to social justice issues. I have made contact with several organizations which advocate for and/or serve the needs of foster alumni in both Washington and Oregon and will freely share my findings. In particular, I am watching the funding situation for Passport to College and other services for foster youth and am ready to actively engage in political advocacy in that arena. I have sought to raise awareness of foster alumni services in several local colleges and have not only provided initial information based on my research findings but have also referred the colleges to outside resources such as Casey Family Programs. Study participants have already received full copies of the research article, something that I promised to them at the time of the interviews.

Finally, I chose the manuscript option for my dissertation in keeping with my overall goals for the study: to provide information that is useful to individual study participants, foster alumni, and advocacy groups, as well as to add to the body of knowledge and help inform practice. The manuscript option facilitates submission for journal publication, and I have in fact submitted both Chapter 2 (literature review) and Chapter 3 (research article) to the Community College Review. If one or both of the articles is accepted for publication, I believe it will facilitate greater circulation of the findings as compared to the traditional dissertation format, and that it therefore represents a better use of my participants’ information and their contribution to this study.

Collective Case Study Approach

This study employed a collective case study design, one in which data are compiled from multiple cases related to the focus of study (Creswell, 2008). Stake (2000) described the collective case study as “an instrumental [individual] study extended to several cases” (p. 437). Similarly, Stake (2006) described the concept of a “quintain,” the issue under study which is addressed through investigation of multiple related cases: “Multicase research starts with the quintain. To understand it better, we study some of its single cases—its sites or manifestations. But it is the quintain we seek to understand” (p.
6). The collective case study method also affords greater opportunity for triangulation of data, since data is collected from multiple sites and/or individuals.

**Areas of inquiry.** In this study, the concept of the quintain is best summarized by examining the guiding question: “What are the experiences of foster youth in the community colleges?” Specific areas of inquiry were determined through a review of the literature; i.e., they were identified as areas in which foster alumni were likely to have struggled and/or to exhibit need that persisted into adulthood:

1. **Academics.** What educational barriers (if any) did participants have upon college entry, and what impact did they have?
2. **Social/Interpersonal.** What types of personal and practical support do the participants have?
3. **Basic Needs.** How are participants meeting their basic needs while in college, particularly in relation to housing?

**Individual Case Review and Analysis**

Although addressing the quintain, as outlined above, was an important part of the research, representing the voices and perspectives of individual participants was also important to me in order to be consistent with the social justice perspective. Therefore, I sought to summarize enough of each case to convey that individual’s perspective without sharing so much detail in a non-aggregated form that confidentiality would be compromised. Below I describe how sites and participants were selected, how the data was gathered, and the methods used for analysis.

**Participant and site selection.** In order to determine the scope of the project, I had considered the target number of participants in the course of preparing my dissertation proposal. Saturation is described in the literature (e.g., Creswell, 2008) as reaching the point where information provided by additional participants strongly parallels existing themes and details. As indicated by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), the number of participants necessary to reach saturation in qualitative research is difficult to determine prior to data collection. They found evidence of saturation for meta-themes with six interviewees, followed by data saturation with 12 interviewees. Therefore, the
target sample for the proposed study was four participants at each of the two college sites (for a total of eight), with participants to be added as necessary within the scope of the project and as available at each site.

In fact, a total of 14 individuals were interviewed at two different college sites. The two colleges were chosen based upon having enough enrolled and actively involved foster alumni to potentially participate in the study and also due to geographic proximity to the primary researcher. Thus, site selection was based upon both purposive and convenience sampling. The interviews consisted of two staff members at each site, four students at one site, and six students at the second site. The information gathered from staff participants was used primarily to triangulate the student data. For example, student self-reports about their strengths were compared with staff members observational statements.

Students came from a variety of backgrounds, with the one common denominator being that they had all spent time in the foster care system. (See Table 1: Overview of Participant Demographics for more information.) Although it was not an area of inquiry for this study, all participants volunteered information about when they had entered foster care; age of entry to care varied from birth to age 15. Additionally, some participants had been in kinship care while others were in non-relative care. These types of details were omitted from most individual case summaries in order to avoid providing too much personally identifying information, particularly since they did not represent areas of inquiry. It should be noted that I intentionally avoided areas of inquiry that might bring up painful memories, yet I remained open to hearing such information if the participants voluntarily shared it.

Participants were identified who met the age guidelines of 18-26. Focusing on this age group allowed consistency with recent legislation for emancipated foster alumni and avoided confounding traditional versus non-traditional student issues, which were not the focus of the present study. However, one 29 year old student was included due to the particular experience he was able to share, which was independent of his current age. His case served as an example of an outlier (Lichtman, 2006, ), which therefore helped to
provide a richer description of the varied backgrounds of foster alumni. Staff participants were chosen based on their direct involvement with foster alumni services.

**Data gathering.** Each participant was interviewed in a private office space provided by the respective college sites to afford maximum privacy. I recorded the interviews using two separate devices (a method suggested to me as a way of overcoming any possible technical failure of one system). Interviews varied from 30 to 75 minutes in length, and followed a semi-structured format, using a protocol; see appendices.

I personally transcribed all of the interviews, keeping the data in two forms: A narrative form representing the individual case, and a tabular form allowing cross-case analysis, as described below. I also performed a six-month follow up in order to update my participant information, and met with three students and three staff participants to conduct member checks, as described below in relation to cross-case analysis.

**Review and analysis.** To review each case, I used a worksheet based upon Stake (2006) that facilitated identification of the prominence of themes related to specific areas of inquiry, emerging themes, and possible excerpts for the multi-case report. I created files for each individual participant, which contain a full copy of their interview transcript, the summary worksheet, case records such as transcripts that served to triangulate findings (e.g., self-report of grades), and releases of information. Thus, I was able to review the individual case as a whole while beginning to consider its relationship to the quinta.

To summarize the individual cases I utilized a method suggested by Yin (2009), in which each summary is presented in approximately the same format in order to allow the reader to begin to recognize some of the cross-case themes. Analysis of individual cases allowed initial comparisons to the literature through the structuring of the protocol itself, yet more substantial comparison to the literature was conducted through the process of cross-case analysis as described below.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

The cross-case analysis allows the quinta—in this case, the experiences of foster alumni in the community and technical colleges—to be examined as a whole.

Throughout, I applied the lens of critical social science to the findings: In what ways
may systems within society and/or within the colleges themselves have contributed to situations that are counterproductive to the participants, in spite of stated purposes? For instance, Washington State has increased tuition assistance to foster youth, yet it may be that without related support services, foster youth are unable to either access or sustain participation in higher education. This line of analysis informed the considerations for practice in particular.

**Analysis methods.** Considering the balance between individual and multi-case review, Seidman (2006) described a two-step process of coding data that is consistent with the method that I employed:

I have used two basic ways to share interview data. First, I have developed profiles of individual participants and grouped them in categories that made sense. Second, I have marked individual passages [in the transcripts], grouped these in categories, and then studied the categories for thematic connections within and among them (p. 119).

As noted above, profiles of individual participants were developed using a worksheet based on Stake (2006), a worksheet that included groupings consistent with the direct areas of inquiry as well as emerging themes. (See Table A-1 for the worksheet used in the present study.) To facilitate the process of identifying passages in the transcripts that corresponded to themes, I utilized a method developed by Ruona (2005), in which functions of Microsoft Word are used in lieu of specialized qualitative analysis software. The transcripts were formatted into tables; responses were coded and then grouped using the “sort” function. Through this process I was able to create two master documents, one for student participant interviews and one for staff. Transcripts, entrance scores, and other related case records were then provided to me by the site contacts based upon releases of information signed by the interviewees.

For each major area of inquiry, cross-case findings were compared with the literature. For example, in the area of “academic preparedness,” the participants in this study showed higher rates of high school completion and lower rates of participation in special education courses than the literature would predict for foster children as a whole.
**Trustworthiness.** To increase internal validity and trustworthiness of the study’s findings, I employed three customary methods (e.g., Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Shkedi, 2005). The first method consisted of triangulation of data; consistent with the collective case study method, multiple sources of information were gathered, and multiple interviews were conducted. As stated by Yin (2009), “A major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence” (pp. 114-115). Further, the staff interviews served as triangulation of student self-reports, and the written data (such as entrance scores) served as triangulation of information on key points. A second method focused on member checks; findings were discussed with a total of six participants (three students and three staff members). A third method, which overlaps to some extent with both triangulation and member checks, involved “peer examination” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). The staff participant reviews served both as triangulation and as a form of peer examination.

**Summary.** This appendix provided information on methods used in this collective case study as reported using the manuscript format. Due to the space limitations inherent to the manuscript format, more information has been included here in relation to personal disclosure and selection of topic, the social justice perspective, the collective case study as a method, and both individual and cross-case analysis and review. The worksheet based on Stake (2006) is included below as part of this appendix.
Table A-1
Worksheet: Analyst’s Notes on Case Report (Stake, 2006)

Code Letters for This Case: __________

**Analyst’s Synopsis (incl. demographics):**

Uniqueness Among Other Cases:

Prominence of Theme 1, Meeting Basic Needs:

Prominence of Theme 2, Personal and Practical Support:
Prominence of Theme 3, Educational Barriers:

Other Themes/Conceptual Factors:

Possible Excerpts for the Multicase Report:

Commentary/Additional Notes
Appendix B

Recommendations for Future Research

This appendix expands upon the recommendations for future research cited in the three manuscript sections of the dissertation. Due to the space limitations inherent to the manuscript format, the sections on future research were more brief in those documents. This section provides recommendations specific to both methods and topic areas for research related to foster alumni in higher education.

Methods

**Summary of existing research methods.** When I began my search for related research in support of the dissertation proposal, it was immediately apparent that the research findings on foster children far outnumbered those on foster alumni. Although some of the research on foster children was relevant to my study question regarding academic preparedness, I wanted to find sources that directly addressed foster alumni issues as well.

All of the research that I found on foster alumni had been conducted within the past 10 years, beginning with research by Courtney and also Burley and Halpern in 2001. This seemed to indicate that recognition of the needs of young people who leave foster care was a relatively recent development. After narrowing my findings to those that were most relevant, 38 sources focused on either foster alumni (23) or foster children (14) were included in the literature review. Of the 38 sources, 10 could be considered policy reports (e.g., Vacca’s 2008 report, “Foster children need more help after they reach the age of eighteen”). Nearly all of the 28 research sources were large-scale studies that used quantitative methods; only two qualitative studies were identified.

One of the most prominent researchers on foster alumni issues is Mark Courtney, formerly of the University of Chicago, now the Executive Director of Partners for our Children at the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. He and his colleague Amy Dworsky have published a number of significant studies on foster alumni issues, some drawing from a Midwest study of 732 foster youth in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin (e.g., Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010). Another important contributor
to research in this arena is Casey Family Programs. A non-profit organization with a clear goal of advocacy, they promote and fund research that seeks to raise the awareness of policy makers and the general public as to the needs of foster children and alumni. For example, they produced a study in 2005 conducted in partnership with public social service agencies in Washington and Oregon, with a sample size of 155 children across both states. Publicly-funded organizations also tend to produce large-scale quantitative studies; Burley and Halpern (2001) of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy utilized data bases from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to examine foster children’s performance on standardized tests while enrolled in the K-12 system. Such studies are valuable and should continue. Large-scale studies that produce numerical outcomes may be especially convincing to legislators and others in positions to impact foster alumni services.

The two research studies that utilized qualitative methods were both unpublished doctoral dissertations. Corwin (2008) conducted an ethnographic study focused on six first-year students in a university setting, while Herlocker (2006) performed a mixed-methods study that included questionnaires for foster youth and Independent Living Program staff as well as focus groups, all with a focus on decisions about attending college. These two studies provide examples of future research that would be valuable, as both in-depth ethnographic studies and mixed-methods studies contribute to the body of knowledge in different ways.

**Participant voice.** Since the majority of studies on foster alumni are large-scale, quantitative studies, what is most clearly lacking is participant voice. For example, Burley and Lee’s 2010 study, “Extending foster care to 21: Measuring costs and benefits in Washington state,” is clearly designed from the perspective of policy makers rather than participants. Such studies are important, yet more studies are needed which represent participant voice. A 2008 study by Davis and Losey does a commendable job of incorporating quotes from foster alumni into a study that is otherwise focused on large-scale policy (e.g., Jasmine transferred to a community college where, “It seemed like the professors were more willing to sit down and talk if you needed to.”) However, the
incorporation of such quotes is all too rare in both large-scale studies and policy reports, leading to a situation where foster alumni’s own perspectives and experiences are not fully represented.

Therefore, additional qualitative studies of all types—including ethnographic, narrative, and case study—would enrich the body of knowledge by allowing the voices of foster alumni to be heard more directly. It is one thing to read that “24 percent of these young adults had been homeless” (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010, p. 4). It is another to hear Lauren, a participant in the present study, state: “As soon as I turned 18, my foster parents told me that I needed to move out…it was my birthday, it was a Sunday.” While both forms of information are important, the addition of first-person report can be compelling in terms of advocacy, leading people to move “from empathy to action” (Shirk & Stangler, 2004, p. 248).

**Comparative studies.** As part of the present study, some comparisons were made to first-generation students, as foster alumni could be considered a subset of first-generation students to some extent. For that reason, research that would directly compare foster alumni in colleges to other first-generation students would be highly useful. The policy implications would also be significant. As noted earlier in this report, federal TRIO programs were created in 1964 to support first-generation college students (Higher Education Act of 1965/1998). Language has since been added to TRIO program mandates to include foster alumni (Fitzpatrick, 2008). However, the findings of this study would indicate that foster alumni are likely to have needs that extend beyond those of other first-generation students (e.g., housing); therefore, studies designed to directly compare these two groups would be a significant contribution not only to the body of knowledge but to informing practice.

**Longitudinal studies.** Since the majority of research findings on foster children and alumni appear either to be drawn from extant data bases or based upon surveys or other data gathering at a particular point in time, additional longitudinal studies would help address a number of issues relevant to foster alumni. For example, the present study suggested “early promise” as an emerging theme: Foster children who score well on
standardized testing early in their academic careers could be tracked and their rate of high school graduation and college enrollment documented. The 2010 study by Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap followed 732 foster youth from three states from the age of 17 to age 23 or 24, tracking outcomes such as living arrangements, relationship with family of origin, parenthood, legal records, education, and employment. Longitudinal studies of this type that focused on the transition from high school to college, including measures of college completion, would be especially informative to higher education practice.

Topics

**Foster alumni.** Additional research is needed that focuses on foster alumni rather than foster children. Although the interest in foster children is clearly worthwhile and should be continued, it is hoped that additional researchers will emerge who have an interest in the needs former foster children as they transition to adulthood. There seems to be a significant body of work based in departments of child welfare and social work (e.g., Mason et al., 2003) that are doing an admirable job of researching the needs of foster children under 18. These researchers need colleagues who will make similar contributions for young people as they age out of care.

In studying foster alumni issues, research that differentiates within the group would be particularly useful. I only found one study (Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007) that talked about distinct subgroups among youth exiting care. This study identified a particular subgroup, the second largest in the study (38%), that appeared to have characteristics conducive to college enrollment: lowest rates of grade retention and highest levels of workforce experience. Their analysis reinforced the notion that foster alumni are not a homogeneous group. As Danielle Dressel, a foster alumna and peer mentor with Pierce County Alliance stated, “Foster youth don’t like being called high risk” (personal communication, May 13, 2011). Since negative stereotyping can result when studies fail to differentiate individuals or subgroups within a population, research that takes differences as well as similarities into account would be beneficial to the field.

**Ethnic and racial minorities.** Minority groups are disproportionately represented in foster care (Lenz-Rashid, 2006; Thayer, 2000; Urquiza, Wu, & Boreggo,
1999). In Washington State, for instance, African American children represent 4.2% of the general population, but they comprise 10.5% of foster children (Children’s Alliance, 2008). However, the research on foster children of color is relatively small, and I located only two studies that addressed racial or ethnic minority status among foster alumni (Dworsky et al., 2010; Perez & Romo, 2011). From a social justice perspective, this is an area of research that clearly needs to be expanded, particularly with the goal of informing practice.

While still in the foster care system, children of color may not necessarily be placed with families that share their background. In the present study, Derrick, did not speak English upon entering this country. When he was placed in foster care, he found himself in homes where English was the only language spoken. Thus, his alienation was twofold: He was an outsider, and he did not understand the language. Ideally, children would be placed in families where their cultural identity can be continued. And once foster children become foster alumni, their identity and adjustment to the adult world would seem to be enhanced by services that are sensitive to their cultural identity as well. In sum, exploring the ways in which ethnic and racial identity interact with foster care status would seem to be a rich area for future research.

**Sexual minorities.** Foster alumni who identify as LGB may face negative reactions from foster parents, ranging from verbal harassment to requests for removal, and can thus be more difficult to place (Clements & Rosenwald, 2006/2007). One study that discussed the specific needs of gay and lesbian teens in foster care indicated that their numbers are not known (Freundlich & Avery, 2004). Therefore, studies that address the experiences and needs of sexual minority foster youth as they reach adulthood would add greatly to our understanding of the needs of individual foster alumni, particularly from a social justice perspective.

**Emerging themes.** Since the areas identified as emerging themes were, by definition, not primary research questions in the present study, future research into the identified areas would be beneficial: early promise, educational motivation, resilience, and mentors. These themes could be explored from both a research and an advocacy
perspective. For example, how many foster children show early promise for academic success? How could they be identified, and what would be effective ways to promote continued achievement? And in relation to educational motivation, how could foster children’s career awareness be raised long before high school?

The area of resilience could be a potentially rich area for future research, since enhancing that quality could positively impact so many other outcomes for foster children and alumni. Finally, mentoring is widely used (United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.), yet there may be ways to design mentoring programs that are more fitting to the particular needs of foster alumni. The new program funded by the College Success Foundation (2011), the Passport Navigator Program, appears promising as it uses peer mentors for foster alumni in the colleges. Research that follows the successes of the Navigator program, perhaps comparing it to other forms of mentoring, would help inform practice.

Community colleges. Finally, research on foster alumni in two-year college settings would be beneficial. One of the reasons I decided to pursue collective case study of foster alumni in two-year college settings was that the few studies I could find on foster alumni in higher education were focused on university settings. Understanding the needs of foster alumni is particularly important for community and technical colleges, since they are a likely entry point to higher education for foster alumni. Universities are able to offer support in some areas that community colleges typically cannot. For instance, the findings of the present study underscored the importance of housing support for students, yet community colleges do not have dormitories. Therefore, additional research focused on immediate needs such as housing to longitudinal studies on issues such as transfer rates from two year to four year colleges would greatly add to the body of knowledge. Additional research in this area would also support informed practice in the two year colleges, foster alumni’s most likely point of entry to higher education.
Summary

This appendix summarized the current state of research in the field and made recommendations for future research in relation to both methods and topic areas. Future research, using a variety of methods and topic areas, would further define the specific needs of foster alumni in higher education and thus both add to the body of knowledge and serve to inform practice.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM: STUDENT

Project Title: The Road to Independence: A Collective Case Study of Foster Youth in the Community Colleges

Principal Investigator: Dr. Darlene Russ-Eft

Student Researcher: Catherine Forte

Co-Investigator(s): n/a

Sponsor: n/a

1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This form contains information you will need to help you decide whether to be in this study or not. Please read the form carefully and ask the study team member(s) questions about anything that is not clear.
2. WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of foster youth in the community colleges. “Foster youth” are defined as young adults age 18-26 who were formerly in foster care.

The student researcher, Catherine Forte, is conducting this study to fulfill the requirements of her doctoral dissertation.

Up to 40 individuals, both students and staff, will be invited to take part in this study. Please note that staff will be interviewed about their experience with foster youth but not specifically about the students participating in the study.

3. WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you may have information to share that relates to the topic of this study if you meet the following description:

- Foster youth status: Former foster child who reached age 18 without returning to their family of origin nor being adopted.
- Current age: 18-26
- Student status: Currently enrolled in community college.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

The study activities include meetings with students and staff, review of records (such as transcripts), and return visits to confirm the accuracy of information gathered. Initial meetings with participants are expected to take about one hour. Return visits are expected to take 20-30 minutes.

Since audio recording is a required activity for this study, individuals must agree to be recorded in order to participate. Recording of the interviews will allow the Student Researcher to create accurate records of the information shared by converting the interviews into written form.
In addition, the researcher will review participant information such as entrance exam scores, transcripts, and related documents as a part of the study. Please initial below if you agree to access of these records:

_____ I agree to release of records (see college consent document)
_____ I do not agree to release of records

Storage and Future use of data or samples:

All hard copy materials will be kept in a locked file, and computer files will be password protected. Audio tapes will be destroyed when the study is finished; hard copy notes and other materials will be kept at Oregon State University for three (3) years after the study ends and then destroyed in a way that guards their confidentiality (for example, papers will be shredded).

Because it is not possible for us to know what studies may be a part of our future work, we ask that you give permission now for us to use your personal information without being contacted about each future study. Future use of your information will be limited to studies about foster youth. If you agree now to future use of your personal information, but decide in the future that you would like to have your personal information removed from research database, please contact Dr. Darlene Russ-Eft at Oregon State University: (541) 737-9373.

_____ You may store my information for use in future studies.

_Initials_

_____ You may **not** store my information for use in future studies.

_Initials_

All participants will receive a summary of the findings of this study.
5. WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND POSSIBLE DISCOMFORTS OF THIS STUDY?

- Sharing of personal information: You can decline to answer any question(s) you wish.
- Emotional distress: If you experience emotional distress in the course of sharing personal information, the researcher is prepared to provide referrals to counseling or other services that may assist you.
- As with any study, breach of confidentiality is a risk. In order to minimize this risk and safeguard your information, documents which contain personally identifiable information (such as your name on a consent document) are stored separately from other research information (such as transcripts of interviews). Additional safeguards include password protection and locked storage.

6. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

This study is not designed to benefit you directly.

7. WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will not be paid for participating in this research study.

8. WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Federal regulatory agencies and the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you.

If the results of this project are published your identity will not be made public.

Audio tapes of interviews will be erased once the final research report is prepared.

To help ensure confidentiality, we will use identification code numbers instead of names on data forms and have locked filing cabinets and storage areas.
9. WHAT OTHER CHOICES DO I HAVE IF I DO NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports.

10. WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Dr. Darlene Russ-Eft, Oregon State University, (541) 737-9373.

If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

12. WHAT DOES MY SIGNATURE ON THIS CONSENT FORM MEAN?

Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.
Participant’s ID code: ____________

Participant’s Name (printed):

______________________________________________________________  (Signature of Participant)  (Date)

______________________________________________________________

(Signature of Person Obtaining Consent)  (Date)
Appendix D

210 Education Hall, Corvallis, Oregon 97331-3502

T 541-737-4661 | F 541-737-8971 | http://oregonstate.edu/education

INFORMED CONSENT FORM: STAFF

Project Title: The Road to Independence: A Collective Case Study of Foster Youth in the Community Colleges

Principal Investigator: Dr. Darlene Russ-Eft

Student Researcher: Catherine Forte

Co-Investigator(s): n/a

Sponsor: n/a

1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This form contains information you will need to help you decide whether to be in this study or not. Please read the form carefully and ask the study team member(s) questions about anything that is not clear.
2. WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences of foster youth in the community colleges. “Foster youth” are defined as young adults age 18-26 who were formerly in foster care.

The student researcher, Catherine Forte, is conducting this study to fulfill the requirements of her doctoral dissertation.

Up to 40 individuals will be invited to take part in this study.

3. WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you may have information to share that relates to the topic of this study. As part of the data gathering for this study, the researcher is interviewing community college staff that work directly with students who meet the following description:

- Foster youth status: Former foster child who reached age 18 without returning to their family of origin nor being adopted.
- Current age: 18-26
- Student status: Currently enrolled in community college.

Staff will be asked about their experiences with foster youth in general rather than about any specific students.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

The study activities include meetings with students and staff, review of records (such as transcripts), and return visits to confirm the accuracy of information gathered. Initial meetings with participants are expected to take about one hour. Return visits are expected to take 20-30 minutes.
Since audio recording is a required activity for this study, individuals must agree to be recorded in order to participate. Interviews will be transcribed by the Student Researcher in order to ensure the accuracy and consistency of study data.

In addition, the researcher will review participant information such as entrance exam scores, transcripts, and related documents. As a staff member, you will be asked to assist with access to these records for participants who have in turn signed the confidentiality and release form.

**Storage and Future use of data or samples:**

All hard copy materials will be kept in a locked file, and computer files will be password protected. Audio tapes will be destroyed when the study is finished; hard copy notes and other materials will be kept at Oregon State University for three (3) years after the study ends and then destroyed in a way that guards their confidentiality (for example, papers will be shredded).

Because it is not possible for us to know what studies may be a part of our future work, we ask that you give permission now for us to use your personal information without being contacted about each future study. Future use of your information will be limited to studies about foster youth. If you agree now to future use of your personal information, but decide in the future that you would like to have your personal information removed from research database, please contact Dr. Darlene Russ-Eft at Oregon State University: (541) 737-9373.

______ You may store my information for use in future studies.

*Initials*

_____ You may not store my information for use in future studies.

*Initials*
All participants will receive a summary of the findings of this study.

5. WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND POSSIBLE DISCOMFORTS OF THIS STUDY?
As with any study, breach of confidentiality is a risk. In order to minimize this risk and safeguard your information, documents which contain personally identifiable information (such as your name on a consent document) are stored separately from other research information (such as transcripts of interviews). Additional safeguards include password protection and locked storage.

6. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?
This study is not designed to benefit you directly.

7. WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?
You will not be paid for participating in this research study.

8. WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?
The information you provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Federal regulatory agencies and the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you.

If the results of this project are published your identity will not be made public.

Audio tapes of interviews will be erased once the final research report is prepared.

To help ensure confidentiality, we will use identification code numbers instead of names on data forms and have locked filing cabinets and storage areas.
9. WHAT OTHER CHOICES DO I HAVE IF I DO NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports.

10. WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Dr. Darlene Russ-Eft, Oregon State University, (541) 737-9373.

If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

12. WHAT DOES MY SIGNATURE ON THIS CONSENT FORM MEAN?

Your signature indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.
Participant’s ID code: ____________

Participant’s Name (printed):

_________________________________________________

_______________________________

(Signature of Participant)            (Date)

_________________________________________________

(Signature of Person Obtaining Consent)            (Date)
Appendix E

Interview Form: Student

Introduction:

My name is Catherine Forte. I am working on an approved research study through Oregon State University that explores the experiences of foster youth (former foster children) in community colleges. This research is part of the course requirements for my doctoral degree in education. The study will involve two colleges in Washington State. Do you have any questions at this time?

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Before we begin the interview, I would like to reassure you that this interview will be confidential and the tape and transcripts will only be available to me and the supervising researcher.

I am continuing with the tape recorder on at this time, is that OK?

Parts of this interview may be included in the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report. In addition, the name of your college will not be included in the final report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic questions/lead in.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is your age?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• When did you enroll at (name of college)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is your course of study or program area?</td>
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<tr>
<td>General question: Please tell me about your college experience so far.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Probe: Foster youth club and services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Theme 1: How are participants meeting their basic needs while in college, particularly in relation to housing?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How are you paying for your basic needs while you are in college? (Probe for employment history.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How are you paying for your college tuition?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Where are you living right now? (Probe: Have you been homeless at any time since leaving foster care? “Couch surfing.”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Are you supporting yourself only, or do you have any children or other dependents?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What sort of transportation do you use?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How do you cover your health care needs?</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Theme 2: What types of personal and practical support do the participants have?)

- Who was most influential in your decision to attend college?
- What do your friends think about the fact that you are attending (name of college)?
- If you needed to borrow $200, who would you go to?
- Some young adults struggle with depression or substance abuse issues. Have any of these issues been a concern for you? (Probe: Current status.)
- Please tell me about your strengths. (Probe by observing strength reported so far, enrollment in college, etc.; what has helped them to do that?)

(Theme 3: What educational barriers did participants have upon college entry (if any), and what impact did they have?)

- When you started college, how did you do on the placement test, the Compass? What have your grades been like in college so far?
- Did you complete high school?  
  (Probe for GED if no.)
- What were your grades like in high school?
- Tell me about your grade school experiences (probe for special needs placement if appropriate).

(Demographics, part two)
- What racial or ethnic group do you identify with?
- Are there any other personal characteristics (disability, etc.) that I should know in order to fully understand your situation?

(Questions on future plans.)
- What are your career goals?
- Please describe what you imagine your life to be like in five years.

(Concluding question) Is there anything else I should know that I haven’t asked you or that we haven’t covered so far?
Probe: Do you have any advice for community colleges that are seeking to serve foster youth?

Thank you for your time and the information you shared. A copy of my final report will be made available to participating individuals and sites. (Give detail on next steps.)
Appendix F

Interview Form: Staff

Introduction:

(My name is Catherine Forte.) I am working on an approved research study through Oregon State University that explores the experiences of foster youth (former foster children) in community colleges. This research is part of the course requirements for my doctoral degree in education. The study will involve two colleges in Washington State. (Name) has approved my participation at (name of college). Do you have any questions at this time?

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Before we begin the interview, I would like to reassure you that this interview will be confidential and the tape and transcripts will only be available to me and the supervising researcher.

I am turning on the tape recorder on at this time. Is it all right for me to continue with the recorder now? (If yes, continue; if no, terminate the interview.)

Parts of this interview may be included in the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report. In addition, the name of your college will not be included in the final report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic questions/lead in.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What is your job title? (Probe: Administration or faculty position?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Could you describe the general responsibilities of your position?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you worked at (name of college)?</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you worked with foster youth?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How many foster youth are currently enrolled at (name of college)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please describe your foster youth program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please tell me about your observations of foster youth in the college setting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please refrain from identifying any specific students; I am interested in your observations in general. (Probe for program services.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 1: How are foster youth students meeting their basic needs while in college? Again, please refrain from identifying any specific students; I am interested in your observations in general.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• (Probe for housing arrangements.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How are the participants paying for basic needs while in college?</td>
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</table>
(Probe for current jobs.)
- How are they paying for college tuition?
- Where most of them living?
  (Probe: Have any been homeless since leaving foster care?)
- Are they supporting themselves only, or do some have any children or other dependents?
- What sort of transportation do they use?
- How do they cover health care needs?

(Theme 2: What types of personal and practical support do the participants have?)
- What have you heard about factors that were influential in their decision to attend college?
  (Probe: Personal influences.)
- Some young adults struggle with depression or substance abuse issues. Have any of these issues been a concern for your students?
  (Probe: Current status.)
- Please tell me your observations of these students’ strengths.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme 3: What educational barriers did participants have upon college entry (if any), and what impact did they have?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• How do the students tend to perform on the COMPASS test? (Follow up with review of testing scores.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What have their grades been like in college so far?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Did most complete high school? (Probe for GED if no.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What were their grades like in high school? (Follow up with transcript review, if available.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How many of the students have a history of special needs or IEP (Individual Educational Plans) from their K-12 years?</td>
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</table>

I would like to conclude the interview with some questions about your foster youth program. (Program questions, if not previously covered).

• What types of services does your program offer?
• What have been some of the challenges in the program?
• Please tell me about some of the
<table>
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<th>program’s successes.</th>
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<tr>
<td>• What would be your advice to other colleges that want to serve foster youth?</td>
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</table>

(Concluding question.) Is there anything else I should know that I haven’t asked you or that we haven’t covered so far?

Thank you for your time and for the information you shared. A copy of my final report will be made available to participating individuals and sites. After I review my notes and materials from the interview, I will contact you once more for review by phone in order to check accuracy. (Obtain contact information if needed.)